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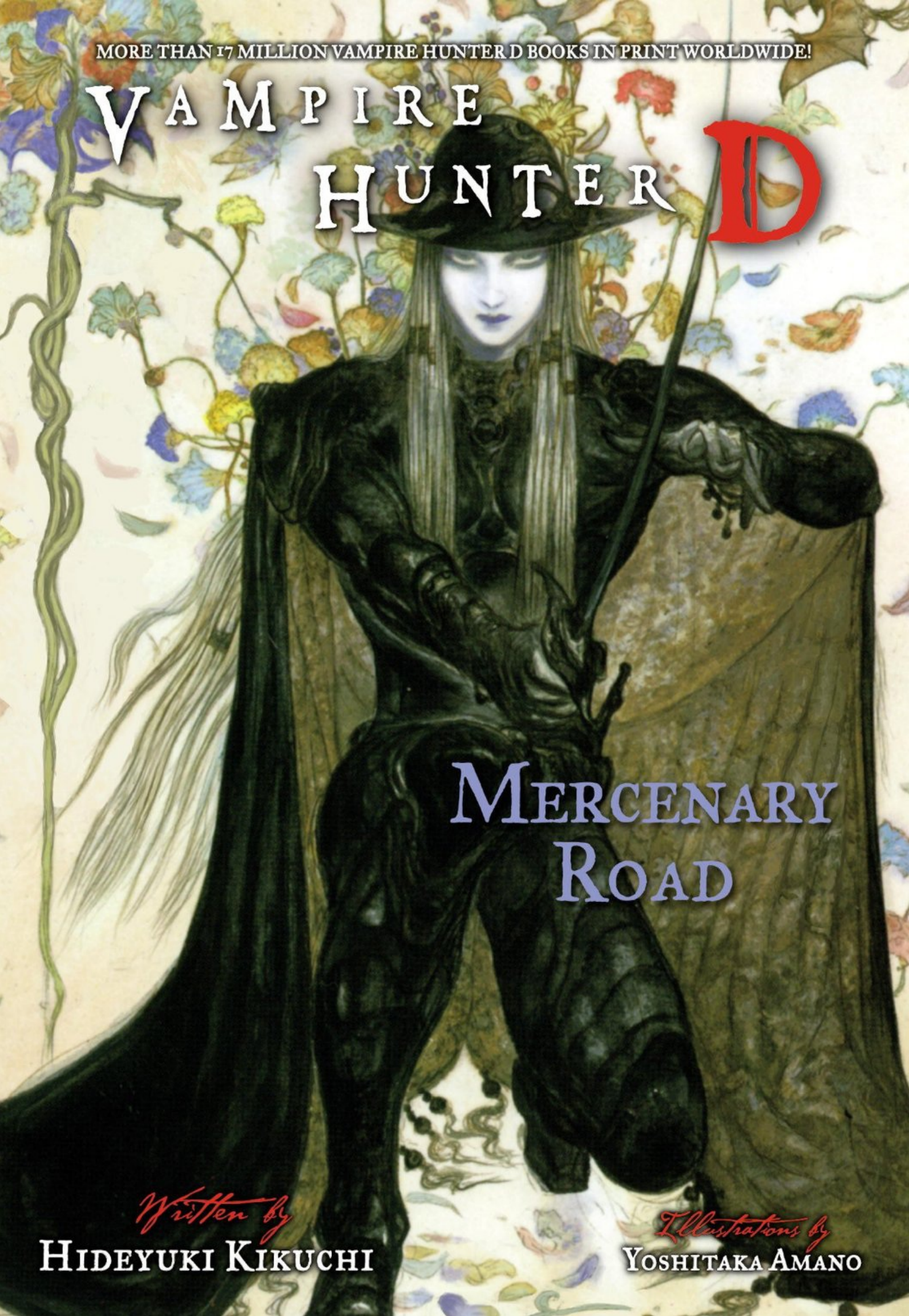

MERCENARY ROAD

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 19

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Dark Horse Books
Milwaukie

Digital Manga Publishing
Los Angeles

Mercenary Road

FOUR OUTLAWS

CHAPTER 1

I

If ever there was a peaceful day on the Frontier, today was such a day. There were none of the winds from the north that carried airborne monsters and evil spirits, so a drunk with a bottle of cheap liquor in hand could walk from one end of Main Street to the other without breaking a sweat. Children were out on the school field engrossed in a rather rough new game that was said to be all the rage in the Capital. The sheriff, having finished his patrol about ten minutes earlier, was completing his reports on a couple of recent crimes, while the owner of the general store sat in the corner of his currently customer-free shop eagerly envisioning the fire-lizard races that would soon be held in the neighboring village. On a day like this, it seemed that even a lone flesh-eating rat crossing the street would've been enough to throw the entire town into a tumult.

Four cyborg horses halted in front of the Bossage Bank, and the riders dismounted, climbed the stairs, and disappeared through the doors. Their movements seemed well considered and rehearsed.

The account of the late security guard Chad Mostow

(as recounted by his medium-summoned ghost):

It was right about noon, and I was musing over whether me or my partner Gazelle Hugo would break for lunch first. I was pretty distracted, so when they came in, it was Gazelle that noticed 'em first. They just plugged me right between the eyes so I didn't see anything, but now I know what happened.

As they came through the doors, they leveled their guns and opened up on me and Gazelle. All four of 'em had ladies' stockings over their heads. I was hit by a

shot from the repeating rifle a washed-up warrior named Zack Morrowbak carried, while Gazelle got it from a shotgun packed by another former warrior, who goes by the name of Scuda Corkly. I was taken out with just one shot, but even after taking a blast to the left side of his body, Gazelle returned fire on Scuda with his rifle, wrecking the outlaw's right arm below the elbow before a third fella, Yuri Tataika, hit him with a shot from his crossbow. Now, since that bow had a fifty-horsepower motor drawing its string, it put an iron arrow right through Gazelle's heart, killing him instantly. He's right beside me now. And next to him is the six-year-old boy who caught the arrow that went through Gazelle in the neck—Peter, the baker's son.

After the four outlaws had taken us out, Zack and Scuda covered the customers while Yuri and the other one jumped the counter and slipped into the office, where the other one took his longsword and cut down the head cashier, Tomak Len—who'd just turned all of twenty—and ordered bank manager Tom Nolan to open the safe. It was only natural that the manager hesitated. He figured the sound of gunfire would have the town's vigilance committee and the sheriff's department running there on the double.

And the outlaws must've known that, too. All of a sudden, the fourth one cut the heads off two tellers, Medelle Hisar and Matthew Nebresco. Both with the same swipe—that's the kind of thing only a Noble or a dhampir could manage with a sword. The manager turned real pale and did like they said, then they grabbed the bags of money before taking the heads off Nolan and the rest of his staff—Matoya Pereslo and Jessica Nielsen. Now the lady teller, Jessica, she was a good ten feet from those other two, but again, they were all killed with the same stroke. Even though the fourth outlaw's blade couldn't have been more than three feet long.

While all that was happening, the two in the lobby tied up the bus driver Concho Hardley, housewives Beatrice Lachauer and Sara Schon, and Peter's mother Katie Dolsenen, but as soon as Yuri and the other one came back with the bags of money, they gunned them all down in cold blood and cleared out.

I don't know the fourth one's name or anything about him. But even in my present state, he scares me. That fourth outlaw is possessed by something. And even though I've passed over to the other side, I still can't begin to imagine

what it is—but until you find out for sure what's in him and destroy it, not even the best warrior will be able to slay him.

Oh, I feel cold all of a sudden . . . Ah, so that's what it is. The thing that's possessing him knows that I'm testifying. Oh, no . . . it's found me! That's it for me. This is the end.

Stay away! Don't come near me! Ahhhhhhh!

Click!

Taking his finger from the button of an old-fashioned tape player, an old man with a gray beard to match his gray head of hair looked over the two people who'd joined him. This was a rather wealthy town where crops and livestock were traded, and considerable funds had been put into this lavish room, making it seem far from what one would expect to find in a simple Frontier town hall. The ceiling, walls, and floor were all literally covered by what could only be described as a gaudy collection of portraits and miniature paintings, and while the room had surely cost a great deal of money, when trying to hold a meeting or conference there it was difficult to relax for even a second, which left all the participants deathly tired.

However, both the woman who was seated about six feet from the gray-haired old man and the man leaning back against the far wall seemed relaxed and totally unaffected by the spell of the room. Like the man against the wall, the woman in the chair wore armor crafted from the soft but resilient scales of the fire dragon—an item that made it clear at a glance that one was a warrior—and over her left shoulder she had a sword of ordinary length. More than its strength, the selling point of her armor was the way the scales were attached to allow freedom of movement. She had the kind of beauty that would leave not only men but even other women staring in awe, but a long deep scar ran down her right cheek, lending her lovely features a fierce intensity. The woman's form was free of earrings, necklaces, rings, or any other trinkets, and the only ornamentation on her armor, gloves, and leg protectors was cuts and scorch marks.

The man, by comparison, wore a navy-blue cape over a wine-red vest lavishly

embroidered with silver and gold thread, and he had gold slacks on. In addition to a gold-handled dagger and some throwing knives, the heavily detailed combat belt around his waist also held a pair of bejeweled revolvers that looked more like works of art than practical weapons.

That wasn't to say he had lousy taste: it was the sort of style any warrior on the Frontier might wear to get people's notice. Wearing this kind of outfit to get work was rather dignified compared to the warriors who put on a real act, going down the main street every time they came into a new town, gunning birds and flying beasties out of the sky with a pair of pistols, finding the town or village lowlife so they could pick a fight with him and kill him, then waiting for a big job to land in their lap—usually acting as a bodyguard or killing someone.

You had to sell your skill at fighting—that's all a warrior knew how to do, and your life could be heaven or hell depending on whether or not you caught the eye of the locals who called the shots. What warriors earned depended on their abilities and the strength and number of their opponents, but on average they were said to bring in about fifty dalas a day. Out on the Frontier, where one dala would buy a family of four a full-course dinner—with thunder beast or three-headed stag as the main dish—that was very good compensation, but it seemed fair for someone who was risking his life. Still, if he were to take part in something big—such as hunting down Nobility or taking on an immortal opponent—a warrior might be promised compensation on the order of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dalas, and that would serve him well in his life after retirement. It was little wonder that he might let his appearance become ostentatious, or his words and deeds exaggerated and overly theatrical.

"After that, the outlaws fought their way through some townsfolk and escaped to where we'd like to send you—the Florence Highway, also known as Mercenary Road. That's why I played that tape of the ghost's testimony for you, even though that incident has nothing to do with this. It couldn't hurt you to know that the mercenaries might not be your only foes out there."

"That is good to know," the warrior against the wall said, nodding. As befitted his face, his voice sounded like iron on steel.

The old man looked at the female warrior as if to ask, *And how about you?*

Though she looked like a hothouse blossom, her voice was cold as she said, “That fourth one—I wonder who he is.”

Her icy voice made the old man recoil, while the man against the wall donned a surprised expression. This was the first time the two warriors had heard each other speak.

“I don’t know. They’re supposed to be able to see everything from the land of the dead, but that ghost was still a wreck. More than the man himself, it’s whatever’s possessing that outlaw you have to watch out for. It’s not unusual for some evil spirits to give a person unnatural strength when they possess him. But I’m sure the two of you will manage something.”

“I wonder if it’ll go as smoothly as all that, Mr. Mayor.”

The eyes of the old man and the lovely woman focused on the younger man’s sun-bronzed face.

“What do you mean by that, Mr. Strider?”

“I’ve got a real nose for these things. For a second there, I sensed something. About what that fourth one is, I mean.”

“Bless my heart,” the female warrior remarked, surprise sneaking into her hitherto-neutral expression.

While female warriors weren’t uncommon on the Frontier, for the most part they made a conscious effort to speak and act just like men. Those who didn’t hide their femininity, like this woman, were a rare breed.

“In that case, you must know something about his nature. Would you be so kind as to share it with us?”

“Regretfully, I must decline. After all, it’s just a hunch. The feeling I got, though—it was almost like he was a dead man. But he’s alive.”

“That’s a strange way of putting it,” the woman said coolly but bemusedly. “Do you know anything else about him?”

“Not a thing. And I don’t want to, either. I just pray I don’t run into him.”

“You still intend to go?” the woman asked, staring at the man called Strider. “If you bailed out of this job, it’d mean more money for me.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing,” Strider confessed, smiling all the while. “My hunch is this won’t be any place for a woman. I don’t mean to tell you your business, but you should walk away.”

“Instead of this line of work, have you ever considered doing stage shows out in the boondocks?”

“What?”

“Well, I’m blinded by that wonderful costume of yours. It must be even harder to be the one wearing it. When the time comes, it might leave you too dizzy to fight.”

The mayor grinned wryly.

Tension filled the room.

II

“You’re one to talk, you third-rate warrior, leaving your back open like that! Please, honor me with some more of your great wisdom,” the man replied, hostility radiating from every inch of him.

Keeping your back covered was the first step in preventing someone from surprising you with an attack from behind.

The woman said frostily, “Having your back to the wall is all well and good, but what do you intend to do if you have to meet with an employer in a hall that seats ten thousand? Shout back and forth at each other for the entire exchange? By the time your meeting’s done, you’ll both be hoarse.”

The man pulled away from the wall. There was a faint sound from the longsword on his back—it was nearly six feet in length. Though it seemed a bit long for someone his height, the sword made it clear that guns weren’t his only weapons.

“We can’t have you fighting at a time like this, Mr. Strider and Ms. Stanza. After all, we haven’t had many applicants for this rescue mission,” the mayor said with displeasure in an attempt to stop them.

The man—Strider—went back to the wall. That was what a professional would do. Only an amateur got so hot under the collar he'd throw away a chance to make some money.

"Couldn't you tell us what this gig entails, already? The deadline for applications is dawn tomorrow; am I right?"

At Strider's sneers, the mayor shrugged his shoulders.

"Two days have passed since you started forming this rescue team. Any real daredevil warriors would be here by now. Give up, already. Time's a-wasting."

Looking up, the female warrior, Stanza, said, "Pardon me for saying so, Mr. Mayor, but the listing reads: *Job: rescue, extremely dangerous. Compensation: ample.* You're not going to get many takers with that. Besides, there's a gang war going on in Cactus, and pretty much anyone who thinks they're any good has headed there to cash in on it."

"Then you mean to tell me you two don't think you're any good?" the mayor said, a bitter grin on his face.

"I want to know what the situation is," Stanza said, pressing for more information. "Do what you will, but people still see things and talk. Strange characters have shown up all over Mercenary Road, and they're attacking farms and ranches—that much I've heard myself."

"And troops from Cactus raced off to help, but were never heard from again," said Strider.

As a native of the Frontier, the mayor had apparently expected this, and he showed no surprise at all as he said, "It was exactly five days ago we got word from the Slocum place along the highway. Two days after that, a hundred armed soldiers raced west along the highway from Cactus, and not a word's been heard from them since. It would seem they were taken out before they could even get a messenger hound off. That's why the authorities in Cactus haven't been able to put down the gang violence. We waited another day after that before taking applications. There's a carriage and driver standing by. I want you to set out tonight."

"But what's the situation?" Stanza inquired.

“According to an emergency carrier pigeon from Slocum’s house, what appear to be armored troops are massing on the highway, attacking each and every home they come to. Their family intended to flee to the ruins—that was all they could tell us.”

“When you say *ruins* on Mercenary Road—you mean *that place*?” Stanza asked, a terrible gleam in her eye.

Strider whistled.

Both of them were surprised—and afraid.

“And communication after that?”

“None whatsoever. To be honest, we don’t know if there are any survivors or not. So, it might be a complete waste sending you folks out there. Nevertheless, we’re willing to pay. Fifty thousand dalas apiece.”

Whistling again, Strider remarked, “Well, that’s most generous.”

“Double it.”

The mayor stared at Stanza. This time, he was practically glaring at her as he said, “Pardon me, but that’s well above the going rate.”

“Not for dealing with something like this. The mercenaries who appear from time to time on the Florence Highway are evil beings created by the Nobility and even feared by the same. It’d be hard enough to sneak by them and make it to the ruins, but then we’d have to make it back again. And I’ve only got one life to lose.”

“There’s no proof that these attackers are the same mercenaries,” the mayor protested in a beastly growl. “They’re just a legend, and died out long ago—some five millennia ago. You think they’d come back after all this time?”

“You do know the Nobles’ lives are eternal, don’t you? It wouldn’t be all that strange for them to breathe new life into these creations of theirs. At any rate, I expect to be paid a hundred thousand dalas. If you don’t like that, I guess I’m done here.”

Shifting the longsword she held to her left hand, Stanza got to her feet.

“I won’t work for peanuts, either,” Strider said, stepping away from the wall.

“W—wait! Just hold on,” the mayor stammered, hurriedly trying to stop them. Beneath a receding hairline, his brow glistened with sweat. “Innocent people are in need of your aid. As a human being, don’t you want to help them?”

“A human being?” Stanza said, a thin smile chiseled on her lips—a smile made of ice. “I used to be one of those, I suppose.”

“I’m with you. See you around, Mr. Mayor.”

“W—wait!”

“Are you gonna pay the hundred thousand?” Strider asked, leaning forward.

“I’ll have to consult our accountants. Digging a tunnel through the mountain chain to our west has left the town strapped for cash.”

“Then you’ll just have to sit back and live within your means, I guess,” Stanza said, turning toward the door.

“That’ll never do. Maintaining and safeguarding the highway is part of our town’s mandate.”

“That means you get special subsidies from the Capital, doesn’t it?”

The mayor gave the smirking Strider a look like he was calling him a third-rate swordsman.

“Ten million dalas a year, as I recall—and you wouldn’t wanna blow that, would you? Just pay out the hundred thousand dalas.”

As Stanza headed for the door, she said, “Talk to your bean counters. I’ll be at the hotel or in a bar.”

“Same goes for me,” said Strider.

After the two of them had left, the mayor said, “This was supposed to be a mission of mercy we were organizing. Money-grubbing bastards!”

Finally able to release his rage, he stomped his feet in anger.

Though the town’s finances might’ve been strained, things were hopping in the Silver Castle Saloon and everywhere else in the entertainment district. This particular establishment operated three separate businesses: a bar, a casino,

and a whorehouse.

The scent of alcohol, drugs, and nicotine hung in the saloon like an iridescent haze, the coquettish voices of women jostled with the angry tones of men, and when the door to a gambling parlor that echoed with the sounds of roulette and cards and the cries of beasts opened, a bouncer hurried toward the exit with a bloodied patron who'd apparently lost his temper after a streak of losses, while a traveler or speculator who seemed to have won big climbed the stairs, accompanied by a bevy of women. Exchanges of gunfire rang out from time to time, but they soon died away, swallowed by the eddying mire of lust.

In one corner of the gambling parlor, a terrible cry of pain went up. An enormous figure that was green from head to toe had just clapped a bear hug on an indigo individual every bit as large as himself. Green muscles swelled like balloons filling with water. The sound of snapping bone rang out, but it immediately drowned in the sea of cheers that went up. Stark bone jutted conspicuously from the indigo body that fell to the floor.

"And green is the winner! Step that way to claim your winnings," the referee of the cruel spectacle that was "monster dueling" called out in a loud voice, pointing to the cashier in the back. Naturally, he was an employee of the Silver Castle.

Covering about seventeen hundred square feet, a third of the staggeringly large gambling parlor, this game took place in a cage fifteen feet tall and fifty feet in diameter. The cage was electrified, and it set off a fierce shower of sparks every time it was touched by one of the modified beasts—captured fire dragons, rock demons, or heavily altered bio-men. Both the house and the customers made these modifications and trained their monsters to fight in order to collect bets. With greater financial resources to draw on, the saloon usually fielded the winning altered beast, though recently some patrons had banded together into project teams that invested a fair sum of money into the monsters they entered, meaning the saloon couldn't rest on its laurels.

"Hey, there!"

Stanza didn't even turn when she was slapped on the shoulder.

In the cage about six feet in front of her, saloon staff armed with electrified

whips were driving the green bio-man to one side of the cage while the dying bio-man was carried out.

“Aren’t you the little ice queen. You mind?” the resplendent warrior Strider asked, grinning all the while.

She hadn’t been kidding when she said she’d be at the hotel or in a bar.

“Suit yourself,” Stanza replied, not because she cared for him, but because it really didn’t matter either way.

For all his complaints about warriors leaving their backs open, Strider was only too happy to leave his back exposed to the other patrons now. After ordering an absinthe from an ass-wiggling waitress connected to the whorehouse, he looked at Stanza’s glass and commented, “You’re drinking the same? You’re a tough one.”

He couldn’t have been any more pretentious in his compliment.

The absinthe served out on the Frontier wasn’t the real stuff like they had in the Capital. Intended for humans who’d been modified for heavy manual labor, the synthesized drink was five times stronger than the original. A flame would not only ignite it—it’d make the stuff explode, and one glass was enough to cause immediate alcohol poisoning and possibly death in the average person. No one in their right mind ordered it, but then, warriors were some kind of monster.

“Anyway, earlier, you had no problem turning your back to me. What’s the story with that?”

“For the same reason you’re doing it now.”

“You mean because anyone who can’t tell when someone’s creeping up on him can’t really be called a pro? When you pull that, it kinda undermines my bluff, you know.”

“Sorry.”

Stanza’s insincere reply was suddenly buried beneath vicious cries and screams. One of the employees bolted from the cage clutching his shoulder, while a few others raced over and shut the door. The cage shook. The bio-man had slammed up against it. Disproportionately long and thick fingers wrapped around the iron bars and began to rattle them violently. Patrons screamed, and some of the women even got to their feet.

“The big guy’s pretty pissed, eh?”

“They must’ve shot him full of drugs to keep him riled up.”

“You can say that again,” Strider agreed, taking the blue glass that’d just been brought to him and draining it in one gulp.

A pale arm wrapped around his neck like a snake. It belonged to a waitress with bare shoulders and a lot of thigh showing.

“Hey, how about you buy me one, too?”

Grinning at her cloying tone, Strider pointed to his empty glass and said, “You want some of that?”

“Yeah. Passed to me mouth to mouth.”

“I see. You say the damnedest things, don’t you? I like you, missy.”

“Same here—this might be L-O-V-E,” she replied, a delicate finger prodding Strider’s cheek.

“But this drink’s not really the thing for you,” Strider said, making a wry face.

“Oh, why not?”

The woman’s right hand began to inch across Strider’s chest. Bringing lips smeared with bright red lipstick to Strider’s ear, she whispered, “The woman next to you—she scares me.”

III

“It’s that obvious, is it?”

“Just now, when I walked behind her, I got chills.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Nodding and grinning, the warrior stared at Stanza’s profile and said, “We got some interesting guests here.”

The two warriors were seated in the foremost row of seats on the north side of the rocking cage. Stanza’s unblinking gaze was focused on a spot on the east side. Finding her complete lack of movement somewhat unsettling, Strider followed her eyes but found nothing save ordinary hick customers. But in his ear,

he heard the female warrior say in a tense tone, “That guy.”

Her tone of voice made the waitress clinging to Strider gasp aloud.

Stanza stood up. The three copper coins worth ten druids each that she dropped on the table scattered noisily.

“Hey!” Strider called out to her, but her lithe form weaved through the patrons as she headed for the door.

“This should be interesting. Well, I’ll be going too,” the warrior said.

Clinging to Strider as he tried to get up, the woman told him, “No, you can’t go.”

“I have to. You’ll just have to settle for this little magic trick I’ll show you.”

“Huh?” the woman said, knitting the brow of what was actually a rather mean visage.

A gout of flames whooshed out in front of her, and she shrieked and leaned back as the flames licked at her heavily made-up face. Screams of a kind rarely heard even in an establishment frequented by misfits and scoundrels rang out, and the other patrons turned all at once in her direction.

“Pardon me!”

“Hey, get outta my way!”

The saloon staff who weaved and shoved their way through the patrons had already gone pale.

The woman writhed on the floor, the outer layer of skin peeling off her face, and the same man who gave the orders to pick her up and bring her into the back room said to the warrior, “Sir, don’t you think you took your joke a little too far?”

The eyes that glared at Strider already swirled with a malice that would not be contained. In addition to the two who took the woman away, there were five more men behind him—all tough-looking guys who didn’t appear to be simple bartenders. They were bouncers.

“Funny, I was just about to say the same thing,” Strider sneered.

“Come again?”

“Look at this,” Strider said, kicking something up from the floor by his feet with the tip of his boot. Remarkably, it flew straight up, and he caught it in the palm of his hand.

“It’s my wallet, which she just lifted from me. As for getting her face burned, well, I guess that’s just divine retribution.”

“So, now you’re gonna lie to us?” the man said. He must’ve been used to this sort of thing, because he didn’t back off. “At any rate, you just burned the face off some of our valuable merchandise. You’re not getting off that easy!”

The gambling-parlor patrons began to relocate. Aside from the noise from the saloon, there wasn’t another sound.

Once the hired muscle had surrounded him, Strider asked, “So, what do you propose?”

“That you come along quietly with me back to my office. And if you have a problem with that—”

“—that’s where these guys come in?”

Strider opened his mouth. Pale blue flames spouted from deep within—it went without saying they were from the absinthe. Strider must’ve known a special trick to ignite it. Turning, he swept around a full 360 degrees. The man from the saloon, the bouncers, and even a distant section of the floor were engulfed in flames.

The saloon was ruled by shrieks of agony. Thrown into a crazed panic by the bouncers rolling all around like human torches, the customers pressed en masse for the doors, with a number of them being trampled to death when they tripped and fell.

And the insanity those flames unleashed sparked another sort of madness . . . in the bio-man in the cage. His mind longed for slaughter, and the flames now compelled him to go berserk. The iron bars that had barely contained him twisted like taffy as he forced his way through. Once out, he was a bloodthirsty beast on a rampage. Countless people and flames danced in his eyes.

She'd watched her target leave the Silver Castle. But even though she passed through the door not two seconds later, there was no sign of him. Entertainment district or not, the night was the world of the Nobility and monsters. Nobody walked around; people could be seen hustling toward different venues in groups, weapons in hand.

"Where'd he get to?" the female warrior mused, looking around, and then there was a dull sound to her left as a figure came flying through the air to slam against the ground. Judging from the thud he made, he must've been punched with terrific force.

Before Stanza could take another step, three more followed the first in succession, piling up on the ground—all in exactly the same spot. It was a work of art, the way each was struck with such precision that they landed in the same place and in the same pose as the first.

By the time the fourth one toppled over, Stanza had reached the turn into the alley from which they'd so mysteriously come. The alley ran down the side of the Silver Castle.

She halted. She'd heard a hoarse voice remark, "Using ranged weapons just isn't right."

Her right hand reached for the longsword on her hip—no, for pencil-like darts stuck through her belt. But before she did anything, her left hand drew a small mirror and held it around the corner.

Reflected in its surface was a giant of a man with both hands raised, and in front of him with a gun leveled was a skinny man with the look of a ne'er-do-well about him. The giant looked to be about six foot eight and nearly 450 pounds, with a beard draped across his triple chins. Neither of them looked particularly charming, and in light of the four men lying in the road, this wasn't a friendly exchange. With a longsword hanging diagonally across that great continent of a back, spells to ward off supernatural creatures scrawled all over his leather vest, and an oversized pair of pants that would allow easy movement, the big man had to be a warrior. Most likely some drifting thugs had come after his money, and he'd underestimated the opposition—but it should be noted that those who'd

set upon him must've been feeling quite sure of themselves. Though four of his compatriots had been put out of commission, the skinny man with the gun had more wrath than fear in his eyes.

"If you want my wallet, I'll give it to you," the giant said. His tone was calm. He was used to such situations.

However, this statement seemed unlikely to remedy matters.

"I'll take it off your corpse. Then me and my friends will get the hell outta here. Okay, start crying and pleading for your life."

Apparently that was why the skinny man hadn't shot him right away.

"Stupid amateur," Stanza suddenly muttered. Clutching a dart, her right hand rose.

It was at that very moment that the wall of the saloon beside the robber and his victim shattered with a terrific crash. Before any of the three knew what was happening, an enormous figure nearly ten feet tall and of inhuman proportions bounded out into the street. It was the same bio-man who'd broken through the cage and escaped—but before this dawned on them, the two men and Stanza noticed something on the creature's misshapen face. There was a huge lump wriggling under the bio-man's nose—actually, it was arms, legs, and a torso. He had a person in his teeth.

Flames shot out in the darkness, followed by a roar. The robber had fired his gun at the bio-man. Striking him squarely in the temple, the three-and-a-half-ounce lead slug bounced off.

The bio-man reeled, and the saloon patron dropped from his mouth. His right hand rubbed at his temple. Beneath the bullet hole, protective iron plating could be seen. That wasn't an infraction—it was completely in keeping with the rules on upgrading combatants.

Confidence in the efficacy of the slug kept the skinny man from moving sooner. The speed of the bio-man's movements was a factor as well. When he raised his fist, it looked like a lump of clay. But the instant it made contact with the skinny man's head, it became a hammer. The man's head and neck were neatly driven down into his torso. It was amazing how the rest of his body remained standing

perfectly straight.

Saloon employees raced out through the hole the bio-man had knocked in the wall, armed with cattle prods to subdue him. Other people spilled into the street.

The bio-man howled. Pale blue waves of electromagnetism from the prods assailed his titanic form. There were sparks from short circuits in a number of places on his gigantic form. Though the voltage was high enough to render a lesser dragon unconscious, in the case of the enraged bio-man, it only served to whip him into more of a frenzy.

One sweep of his arm mowed the saloon staff down like bowling pins. The body that hit the wall of the hotel across the street was a corpse by the time it sailed through the air.

“We’ve got no choice—gun him down!” commanded a man in a white shirt and bow tie, apparently the one in charge.

However, before they could concentrate their fire on the gigantic figure, the bio-man extended the fingers of his right hand and drove them into the ground. His arm went in all the way to the shoulder, as if he were plunging it into water.

A saloon employee came at the bio-man with a raised longsword. Catching the gigantic creature at the base of the neck, the blade halted when it struck the iron plate, and the waves of electromagnetism that still surged through the bio-man coursed into the man holding the sword, killing him instantly.

By this point, the robber’s cohorts who’d been knocked into the street had picked themselves up and moved as a group to the entrance to the Silver Castle. Not that they were trying to get away. They were looking for a victim in the chaos.

Just then, someone behind them shouted, “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

Turning, they found a dazzling light pulling away from the crowd at the entrance to the street and heading in their direction. It was Strider.

The four thugs exchanged glances that seemed to say, *What’s this clown all gussied up for?* But at the same time, there was a malicious gleam in their eyes.

What'll we do? one whispered. *That stupid getup is flashy, but by the look of him, he's a warrior.*

Kill him, another whispered. *Just open up on him without any warning.*

Nice, said a third. *Don't give him a chance to draw his blade.*

They all reached for their guns in unison.

A sharp roar echoed down the night street.

Just as they were drawing the pistols from their holsters, the four thugs froze.

It was said that a genius at the art of war could knock a bird from the sky with a moment of concentrated resolve. Strider's roar was equally powerful.

Leisurely walking over to the four thugs who'd become veritable statues and checking that no one else around was watching him, Strider reached into the coat pocket of the foremost robber with his right hand and pulled out his wallet. Quickly examining the contents, he said, "Sheesh, that's just pathetic. I can see why they blew into town."

Ignoring the fact that his own actions were equally immoral, he checked the wallets of the remaining three. With each of them, he spat in disgust.

"Well, not much I can do about this, I suppose. Guess I'll go back to my room and have a drink."

Saying this, the warrior spun around—and stopped cold.

At that moment, the bio-man was running amuck in the alley, and a giant of a man had stepped in front of him. The vicious beast raised his right hand. Onlookers began to flee, and Stanza was about to put the right hand she'd raised again into action—and then everyone stopped. The bio-man, the giant, and Stanza.

Darkness was what they knew then. And the true nature of the unending terror that lay within it.

Strider's ears caught a peculiar sound. The bio-man, the giant, and Stanza all heard it too.

The darkness was coming. Riding death's black steed, with its iron-shod

hooves.

Don't look! their souls ordered them. *Don't look, don't touch, don't smell.*

What was coming now, humanity was never meant to see. What was a human being? Something that had a soul. And that was why their souls commanded them, *Just let him pass*.

The horse and rider passed directly in front of the four thugs. They also went right by Strider's side. None of them turned to look. Everyone else nearby had paused, as well—including Stanza. Darkness in the form of a rider and mount passed immediately behind her. Only the bio-man turned and watched. He alone bucked the rule of the darkness, for he and the darkness had touched ever so slightly.

The terror drove the bio-man insane. Crouching down, he became a massive missile as he launched himself at the horse and rider.

No one saw what happened. The gleam of light that split the darkness, the sound of blade cleaving flesh and bone, the last dying breath expelled from the bio-man's lungs—no one caught any of these things. They heard only the heavy thud of him hitting the ground.

Presently, the sound of the hoofbeats faded in the distance, and when the three warriors—who were ashamed that the spell of the darkness had frightened them—looked up, all they saw was a huge and horrible body lying in the street. Stanza and the giant were the first to race over to it. It was almost as if the sound of their footsteps, clearly of this world, was an indication that the spell of the darkness had finally been broken. They watched as the bio-man's colossal body split lengthwise from head to crotch, exposing a cut that was as clean as polished steel.

A ROVING BAND OF FIENDS

CHAPTER 2

I

The Exavier was a small hotel that stood at the southern edge of town. Since it wasn't on Main Street, it always had vacancies. Slumbering on the checkin counter was a black cat of unknown origin that'd been there as long as anyone could remember. The cat was famous for the way it would open its eyes and throw a glance at anyone who came in, even if they were the stealthiest of thieves. As the building was over fifty years old, an intruder couldn't take a step without the boards creaking. However, the visitor they had today didn't make a single sound. Even when he walked right by the counter and up the stairs, the cat didn't awake.

Halting before a room on the second floor, the shadowy figure cocked his head to one side. After rapping on the door, he pressed himself against the wall to the right. When the room's occupant appeared, he wanted the element of surprise.

He didn't expect an answer. There wasn't a sound to be heard.

After waiting thirty seconds, he thought, *Must be out*. Just to be sure, he gave the doorknob a twist, and the door swung effortlessly into the room.

There was no sign of anyone. He couldn't sense the faintest trace of the unearthly air that'd paralyzed him the night before. Entering the room, he reached back and shut the door behind him.

There was a pair of connected living rooms, with doors on the right to the bedroom and bath. Though evening was still far off, a faint gloom hung over the table, chairs, and closet. The curtains were drawn on the windows. This was the kind of world in which the room's occupant must've been born and raised.

Suddenly every inch of the man was enveloped by an egregious fear. It was the

same unearthly air he'd sensed the night before. The one he sought was in.

"What do you want?" said a voice behind him—beside the door.

What a rank amateur's mistake—his opponent had tricked him with the same hiding maneuver he'd tried. But the voice was lovely. Even though its tone was one of steel . . .

"Nice to meet you, I suppose I should say."

At least he managed to speak. He'd intended to put some force behind the words, but wasn't so sure he'd succeeded.

"Strider's the name," he continued. "I'm a warrior. And I'm here to give you a piece of my mind."

There was no reply.

"Is it okay if I turn toward you now?"

"No one told you not to move."

This stunned the warrior, but he managed to get over it and turn around. He could feel his mind slipping away from him. Even in his room, the other young man hadn't taken off his traveler's hat or coat. But everything about him, including his exquisite features, was darkly glowing.

"Could I trouble you for your name?" the man said, but it didn't sound like he was addressing another human being. Still, he seemed to have gotten his point across.

"D."

Strider's mouth fell open.

"So you're . . . that dhampir."

After this, he didn't say another word. D's good looks were melting his brain.

"If you have no business with me . . ."

"No, I do. I've got a beef with you. The mayor called you here, didn't he?"

Nothing from D.

"Well, thanks to you, the bastard's turned down our offer. Told us there'd

been a highly qualified applicant, and that he no longer needed our services—but he'd hire us if we were willing to work for half his original price. So you can see why I'd wanna air my grievances."

"Go tell it to the mayor," D replied, his advice straightforward and simple.

"I've already been there. Only the bastard won't see me at all, and he's got himself at least twenty guards now. He just wanted to know if I'd take the job for a pittance or not. Hell, I could take out a hundred of those hick guards, but I need the money. In the end, I just bit the bullet and took his offer. Which meant all I could do was come here and complain to the cause of all this."

"So?"

Terror jabbed into the nape of Strider's neck. D was asking if he wanted to make something of it.

Swallowing hard, the warrior said, "I was gonna threaten you, but I've changed my mind. Since it never hurts to ask, what do you say to the two of us joining forces?"

D said nothing.

"It's so we can both get more money out of him. There's someone else who probably took the job under the same conditions. Teaming up with the renowned D would give me a better position to negotiate from instead of sticking with her."

"Leave."

"Hey, hold on, now!"

"You have a visitor," said D.

"What?"

A knock resounded.

D opened the door.

"Excuse me," Stanza said, poking her head into the room. With a trenchant gaze she scanned the room from the doorway. She was perplexed by what she saw.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

“The same thing as you, actually.”

“Is he in?”

Strider tossed his chin.

D couldn’t be seen from the doorway.

“May I come in?”

“Yes.”

D’s reply sent a tremble through Stanza. Despite the fact that D was less than a foot and a half from her, she hadn’t sensed him at all.

Closing the door, she said to him, “I’m Stanza, the warrior.”

“I’m D.”

The same stunned reaction as Strider’s crossed the female warrior’s already melting face.

“You’re . . . D? Come to mention it . . . you really are gorgeous, aren’t you?”

Judging by his demeanor, Strider was about to retch, but he didn’t say a word. This, too, was due to D’s looks.

“What do you want?”

Looking at Strider as if he were a pebble in the gutter, she said, “Why don’t you leave?”

“*What’s* that?”

“We’re finished,” D said.

“I suppose we are,” Strider said, glaring back at Stanza. “But think it over, anyway.”

“No.”

Though the warrior shrugged at D’s reply, he didn’t seem terribly disappointed as he told the Hunter, “Watch yourself with that little minx.”

And with that, he left.

Walking over to the door, Stanza squinted her eyes. She soon gave a nod and turned to face D. She'd been listening to make sure she heard Strider going down the stairs.

"You have a beef, too?"

"Huh?" Stanza exclaimed, looking at D's left thigh. That was where the voice had come from.

Balling his fist tightly, D said, "Nothing."

Stanza furrowed her brow. "Do you have a cold or something?"

"No."

"Can you throw your voice?"

D said nothing.

"Well, not that it matters. Do you mind if I have a seat?"

Not a word from D.

Hiding her dissatisfaction, Stanza smiled and said, "I like men of few words."

"State your business."

"Would you join up with me?"

"No."

"You don't beat around the bush, do you?" Stanza said with a wry grin. "Thanks to you, my pay's half of what I was originally offered. Not that I have any choice. Still, I have a bad feeling about this gig. So I wanted to throw in with the toughest player in the game."

D remained silent.

Not seeming to mind, Stanza suggested, "Say, why don't you see what I've got before you answer?"

"Leave."

"Don't be that way. There's no harm in checking out what someone else is capable of. After all, everyone who's seen what I can do up until now is dead."

Without waiting for his reply, Stanza stood up—the act was more motivated

by her own desire to show off than the fact that D was ignoring her. Standing at ease, Stanza suddenly flicked out both hands. There were hard thuds as something sank into the walls to either side of her.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” a hoarse voice remarked with admiration.

This time Stanza paid it no mind, asking, “What do you think?”

Portraits hung on either wall. The plates under each identified them as the hotel’s founder—they were not exactly the most attractive decorations. Slender darts jabbed into the eyes of each portrait. Her hands had moved so quickly, you literally couldn’t see her draw the weapons. Without a sound, she’d unleashed eight of them—sticking four into each portrait. They’d all struck within a millisecond of each other. If a dozen men were to come at her at the same time, she could undoubtedly blind them all in a split second.

“Well?”

“Ain’t that a cute trick.”

Stanza turned and looked.

There was no one there but D.

“A cute trick? I’d like to hear you say that again,” she said angrily, but her remark lacked conviction.

The insult had come from D—he was the only one there. However, she just couldn’t picture him saying that.

“Say it again! Go on, tell her!” Strider’s voice called from the direction of the door.

He was standing in the doorway. Apparently, he’d come back.

“What are you here for?” Stanza asked, giving him a look that could kill.

“You know, I just didn’t have a good feeling about this. D or not, he’s dealing with a woman here. I couldn’t be sure you wouldn’t wrap him around your little finger.”

II

“Leave,” D said.

Though they’d been glaring at each other up to that point, the pair suddenly looked at D.

“Okay, I know what we can do, Stanza,” Strider said, taking a step forward. “We were both wrong trying to pull a fast one on each other. What do you say to the two of us hiring D together? He’d be a great guard!”

“Where would we get the money for that, you idiot?”

“*What* did you just say?”

Once again a thread of murderous intent linked the two warriors.

Flashes crossed in the gloom. A mellifluous sound rang out. Having drawn and struck in a single motion, Strider returned his sword to its sheath.

“Too bad,” he said, grinning from ear to ear. “I stopped your toys, bitch.”

Fresh from the scabbard, his blade had split the darts Stanza hurled in two.

Smiling, Stanza touched her forefinger to her right cheek.

Since the gesture seemed meaningful, Strider touched his hand to his own cheek, and then he gasped. His fingers were damp with fresh blood.

“You only stopped half. As for the other half—if I’d wanted to, I could’ve put them right here!”

As Strider watched Stanza’s finger tap the middle of her forehead, his features twisted into a fiendish mask.

Stanza’s smile vanished.

The atmosphere was so thick with murderous intent that the brief moment of a sigh was all that separated life from death, but the air was returned to normal by an icy voice.

“Don’t make me tell you again. Leave.”

The two warriors turned to D in unison. Eyes that were wild with killing lust dimmed. They turned and headed for the door without saying a word.

Once the door had shut, the hoarse voice said, “Those dopes don’t have any idea how outclassed they are—of course, I don’t think anyone but people like them would even try to take the Florence Highway. By the way they’re acting, they’ll probably tag along. I just wonder if they have any idea this won’t be a simple rescue mission. At any rate, the mayor set tomorrow morning as the time to head out. Until then, we should get our rest . . . Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

D was picking up the saddle and bags he’d set next to the wall.

“We’re heading out now.”

“*What?*”

“It looks like we might pick up dead weight otherwise.”

“You’re right about that, but—gaaaaah!”

After squeezing his left hand into a tight fist, D grabbed the saddle and headed for the door. The saddlebags were slung over his shoulder.

The ringing of a bell made him halt. A phone hung on the wall. The town was quite proud of the fact that every house had a telephone installed. The power station was in the desert to their west.

Setting down the saddle, D took the receiver with his left hand and held it to his ear.

“This is the mayor,” he heard a voice say. “I’ve decided I want you to let those other two accompany you. Consider that an order.”

“They’ll just be in the way.”

“Well, the town wants to take every possible precaution,” the mayor said, his voice quavering. That was to be expected, given the man he was addressing. “Consider bringing them along to be part of what we’re paying you that million dalas for.”

“Find someone else, then.”

“I can’t very well do that.”

“Then keep your mouth shut.”

“Fine. I leave it up to you. But if they follow along, I don’t want you people killing each other!”

Before the mayor could hang up, D replaced the receiver.

“Ain’t they the tricky ones, tapping your line,” his left hand remarked with amusement. Someone could’ve been standing right next to the Hunter, listening intently, and they wouldn’t have heard a word. It was a strange dialogue only D and his hand were privy to.

“What’ll you do?”

“Just as I’d planned.”

At D’s response, the hoarse voice seemed to laugh.

“See you, then.”

It was a second later that D’s left hand fell off at the wrist.

Down on the floor, the severed limb deftly worked its fingers to crawl under the sofa.

Putting the stump of his left arm into his coat pocket, D headed for the door. Halting just shy of it, he stepped to one side.

A ferocious knocking drew a derisive laugh from under the sofa.

“Guess I’ll be staying here a while.”

The rapping soon ceased, only to be replaced by a voice like a broken bell that asked, “Hey, are you in there or what?”

Following this, the doorknob twisted frantically.

Before it could turn all the way, D asked, “What do you want?”

The voice brimmed with delight as it said, “Oh, so you are in? It’s me. You remember me, don’t you.”

“*Me* isn’t a lot to go on.”

“Gonna be difficult, are you? When you took care of that souped-up bio-man last night, I was at the end of the alley. I figured you’d know who I was.”

“The big fellow?” said the voice from under the sofa.

“Oh, you can do different voices, can you? I guess I should expect that from the man known as D.” He sounded deeply impressed. “It’s just because of stuff like that that I have a request for you. Open up. Come on. Open the door.”

The door was struck again. The room shook.

“Would you let me in already? This hotel is really falling apart!”

III

D reached for the doorknob. There was something crestfallen about the act.

A veritable wall of human flesh wearing a heavy chest plate lumbered in. Six foot eight, he weighed nearly 450 pounds. At that size, his chest plate and gauntlets had to be custom made. Of course, all the top-notch warriors wore custom-made armor anyway.

“Don’t jump out and belt me,” he said, looking out of the corner of his eye to where D stood by the wall to his left. “Oh, there you are. It really is nice to meet you, I must say.”

Suddenly the big man extended his hand. He must’ve wanted a handshake. But then he seemed to understand what he was doing.

Immediately pulling his hand back, he said, “Oops, sorry about that. If you gave your right hand to everyone you met, you’d be a poor excuse for a Hunter.”

His belly shook as he laughed. Apparently he was cheerful to the very core.

“What do you want?”

“I have a request for you,” he said, slapping his protruding belly with a great mitt of a hand. It wasn’t quite clear whether he was proud of his stomach or ashamed of it. But then, all portly people seemed to be that way.

“Not interested.”

“Hear me out before you say that,” the grinning giant said.

“What is it, then?”

“Hold up a minute. First, I have to tell you what I want. I’d like you to go with me now.”

“No.”

“Why not?” the man asked, looking surprised and disappointed. Apparently he wasn’t the kind to give much consideration to other people’s circumstances.

“I have pressing business. I’m going.”

“Come on. Wait a minute. There’s something in this for you. The fact of the matter is—”

Once he’d listened to the man, D once again turned him down.

“I ain’t asking you to do it for nothing. I can tell you all about the vampire castle on the Florence Highway!”

D’s eyes gleamed.

“It’s the truth,” the man continued. “Thirteen years ago, I went into that castle and came out alive, the only survivor.”

“Tell me your name,” said D.

“Uh, why?” the giant stammered, shaken.

“As you say, seven Hunters entered the castle, and only one returned—a man with an unusual name. So tell me yours.”

“Er . . .”

D started walking toward the door.

“Oh, all right. It’s ——,” the giant said, the last part unintelligible.

“I didn’t catch that.”

“Beatrice.”

Nothing from the Hunter.

“Okay, my name is *Beatrice*!”

“Good enough. But I can only give you an hour.”

It would take about that long on a fast horse to reach the place mentioned by

the giant, Beatrice. However, the giant donned a smile.

Pounding his chest, he said, “Then it’s settled. Just follow me, and try to keep up, will you?”

Once he’d paid for his room and gone outside, D had a five-minute walk to the mechanic’s shop where he’d left his cyborg horse for a tune-up. Beatrice brought along his own horse.

“Yes, indeed, you sure are one heck of a looker,” the bearded Beatrice said pensively, the remark slipping from him as he sat astride his steed in front of the mechanic’s shop. “The clerk back at the hotel and this mechanic here are both grown men, but after talking to you, they looked as if they could just die. A man’s luck in life is set the moment he’s born, true enough.”

“Let’s go,” D said, cracking the reins.

“That’s one strange request he’s taken him up on,” the mayor said, taking a pair of preposterously large earphones off and looking at the secretary who stood behind him. “But I’ll have no delays here. Get some people right away, and —oh, what’s this?”

Noticing the sounds trickling from the earphones, he put them up to his ear again. There was more than one listening device planted in the hotel room.

Less than two minutes had passed since D and Beatrice left. One of the bugs had picked up the sound of the door opening once more.

“It would seem he’s come back. Both of them have . . . Oh, and it appears they’ve decided to wait until tomorrow.”

The voice that reverberated against his eardrum stated, *It looks like the mayor’s posted a watch outside the hotel.*

It was D’s voice.

Still, there’s no need to rush into this, Beatrice responded. *For one thing, I’ve got to wonder why the town’s vigilance committee hasn’t set out on a rescue mission. It must be because the person running the show is incompetent. That*

mayor really sucks.

You can say that again, D concurred.

Can't you just picture his wife and kids? That mayor is one ugly bastard. That right there's proof he ain't been eating right his whole life.

D seemed to be applauding.

Noticing the mayor's reaction, the official standing beside him suggested, "Would you like me to replace you on that?"

The mayor's eyes were bloodshot and blue veins rose on his brow, twitching as if to put him out of his misery. Giving the other man no reply, the mayor kept the earphones pressed to his ears. His hands were trembling.

If a person don't eat the right stuff when he's a kid, it affects his character. I'd say the ol' mayor must've had rock-hard bread and water every day. There ain't a bit of class in his face.

As Beatrice chortled, the mayor slammed the earphones against the floor. Though all sorts of ways to take revenge raced through his brain, it was plain that he currently had no choice but to rely on the handsome Hunter.

"This way, please," said the receptionist who'd heard Beatrice's request, standing and showing them the way. Her face seemed half melted. She'd looked directly at D.

Traveling down a long corridor, they soon came to a door with a plate affixed to it indicating it was the director's office. A small desk along with a battered set of chairs and a coffee table for receiving visitors sat in front of a window, while behind the desk was a short, plump old woman who was just rising from her seat.

"I'm Miss Manpoole, director of the Normanland Orphanage. And this is the assistant director, Mrs. Denon."

The tall, husky woman standing beside the desk bowed her head. She perfectly fit the image of a strict teacher.

Running a plump finger across the documents on her desk, Director Manpoole

said, “So, you wished to see our ward Franco Gilbey? And your name is . . .” Looking up at his hirsute countenance with surprise in her eyes, she continued, “Beatrice.”

Seeing his nod, she shook her head a little.

“Your occupation—a teacher?”

“Yes.”

Tilting her head to one side, Miss Manpoole looked at D and asked, “And this gentleman?”

Her cheeks were flushed.

“Oh, him? He’s my lack—I mean, he’s my *apprentice*. Yes, indeed.”

“Well, he certainly is handsome. Isn’t he, Mrs. Denon?”

“Oh, that he is!” Behind the schoolmarm’s thick spectacles were eyes that’d been emblazoned with the figure in black.

“On receiving word from the reception area, I checked and found that Franco Gilbey is presently engaged in a physical education class. Would you be so good as to wait until it has concluded?”

Looking troubled, Beatrice said, “Well, actually, I ain’t—I mean, I *don’t* have a lot of time.”

“The boy is going to represent our orphanage in this Frontier sector’s soccer tournament. This is a crucial time for them. Are you certain you wouldn’t like to wait?”

“No, that’s okay—I’ll be fine. As long as he’s doing well, I—well, I don’t need anything. We’ll be going now. Oh, I’d like to make a contribution.”

The big man pulled a little leather bag from the inner pocket of his jacket and set it on the table. It jingled.

“It’s really not much, though.”

“Don’t be silly,” the director said, smiling warmly at the unkempt giant. “As embarrassing as it is to admit, our orphanage is always hard pressed for funds. We’ll be more than happy to accept it. May God bless you, sir.”

Taking the bag in hand, she noticed Beatrice's expression.

"Is something the matter?"

"No—I was just wondering if you could give me one of those coins back."

"Of course."

"You see, yesterday I did a little gambling and managed to clean myself out. It really is a sad tale to tell."

Though Mrs. Denon's expression became one of disapproval, in keeping with her character, the director beamed and said with a nod, "At least you're honest. Please, go right ahead and take it."

"Much obliged."

Hunching his massive form, Beatrice opened the bag, pulled out two coins, and looked at them with distress before nodding to himself and putting one back.

Fighting back a laugh, Director Manpoole bowed to him politely.

"Mrs. Denon, take this," she said, entrusting the bag to the assistant director.

"So, what might be your connection to Franco Gilbey?" she inquired.

"Er, his father asked me to do this."

"Franco still has a father?"

"Yeah, sort of."

"Where is he, and what does he do?"

Beatrice hastily replied, "Well, it's—nothing special, really. He's a traveling painter."

"Well, I'll be."

"A month ago, I made his acquaintance in a town in the eastern Frontier, you see. That's where he gave me those coins. Well, there must be a lot of dough—I mean, *money*—to be made painting pictures. He said he really hated to admit it, but he had a kid he'd left with this orphanage ten years ago. He couldn't face him. So he asked if I could at least go see if he was growing up fine—and, well, that's about all there is to it, sure enough."

“In that case, please take all the time you need.”

“Well, we’re in a hurry.”

“I see. I’ll have him summoned,” she said, nodding to the two men.

“No, you don’t have to do that. If I can see him from a distance, that’ll be fine. That’s all I was asked to do, so there’s no need to talk to him. I figure I can write his father a letter about how it went.”

Miss Manpoole looked bemused, but since occasionally they had this sort of request, she quickly got to her feet.

“Well, then, come with me. You too, Mrs. Denon.”

LEGEND OF THE SUPERNATURAL TROOPS

CHAPTER 3

I

The group of four went out into the courtyard. All across the school grounds, which looked like a perfectly cleared section of the plains, children were running around. Looking them over, the director's eyes came to rest on a certain cluster. Pointing, she said, "The littlest one is Franco."

It was obvious at a glance that what they were kicking around wasn't a leather-covered ball. It was bound in a flexible cloth that hardly bounced at all, but still it sailed through the air when the boys kicked it. A bunch of them were running toward it. Just when one of their feet kicked the ball, a little figure flew between them like a gust of wind, stole it away with some exquisite footwork, and kicked it toward a goal fashioned from sticks. Though the keeper made a horizontal dive across the front of the net, there was a gap between his hands and the ball reached the goal. Cheers erupted from the spectators. The victor's teammates hugged him—and then even the members of the opposing team ran over en masse, clapped the boy with the pearly white grin on the shoulder, and walked off. They were all smiling.

"That's him?" Beatrice asked.

"Absolutely. You sure you don't want me to call him over?"

There was no reply. The hirsute giant looked as if he were all alone. His eyes squinting as if blinded by the light, he watched as the diminutive boy kicked the ball again. Everyone chased after it. A cheer went up.

The director began to speak softly, saying, "That boy came to our orphanage in the year his father mentioned to you. He was three at the time. We call that the critical age. How a child's been treated up until that point will decide the better

part of his life.”

“You don’t say,” Beatrice replied, seeming to accept the truth of this. “So, how was it with him?”

“Franco Gilbey’s parents must’ve been exceptional,” said the cold schoolteacher.

The director nodded.

“I won’t bore you with every little detail of his life here. However, I can tell you something that every member of the staff accepts. Franco Gilbey currently looks after the youngest class of children here. Usually he plays right along with them in the mud, and if one of the children does something wrong, he has no qualms about giving him a smack. The same is true when he’s dealing with an older boy. But then he always finds something good about the child and praises him. I’m sure he must’ve been raised in the same manner. While human beings are creatures that don’t forget hatred and loathing and are disposed to make others feel the same things they’ve suffered, at the same time they can also have this wonderful spirit that makes them want to share joy and awe. And I say again: this child was brought up in such a manner.”

“Mrs. Denon is correct,” Miss Manpoole said, taking over the discussion. “If we knew that his parents were alive, we’d find them and ask them to drop whatever they were doing and come teach here.”

D looked at Beatrice.

The giant was silent. After some time, he said, “Well, I’d be opposed to that idea. I mean, we’re talking about someone who abandoned a three-year-old kid. I don’t care what they did before that. They’re a waste of flesh.”

The director of the orphanage and her second in command looked at each other.

“Based on his outstanding scholastic accomplishments, it’s been decided that Franco Gilbey will be going to a special school in the Capital with a few other children,” the director said. “Though he’ll have to pay his own tuition, I’m sure he’ll manage somehow.”

It was Beatrice who suggested they get going.

Once the pair who'd seen them off dwindled from view, Beatrice said, "That's a load off my mind. Thanks."

He winked at the Hunter, his expression cheerful.

D said, "That's your boy, isn't it?"

"Don't be an idiot," he spat through his beard. "Me, have a great kid like that? Not a chance! Of course, he's the son of the sort of parents who'd abandon their kid. Probably won't amount to much, you know?"

Nothing from the Hunter.

"All that aside, you're headed for the Florence Highway for this rescue mission, right? I'll give you the information, as promised. Just take me along with you."

"You'll only be in the way."

"I can give you other info, too. Come on, now, don't get angry with me. Look—just being on the receiving end of your vibes has the hair on my arms standing on end. But right now, I'm flat broke. I really need the reward money from that rescue mission."

"Apparently the price has dropped quite a bit."

"Well, not a hell of a lot can be done about that," said Beatrice. "But for a plain ol' warrior, it's still a heap of money."

"Fulfill your part of the bargain."

"Okay—you mean the bit about the vampire castle, right? Hold onto this."

With that, he pulled a battered notepad from his breast pocket and handed it to D.

"I've written down every last thing I can remember from that incident. After I got back from the castle, I was running a fever of a hundred and four for a while. That's when I wrote all that stuff down. Sad to say, I can't be sure how accurate it is. Once the fever broke, I lost all memory of what'd happened at the castle. Sorry if there are any mistakes."

D trained his gaze on the first page of the notepad. Without saying a word, he

slipped it into his coat pocket.

“So, it passes muster? Thank you!”

In lieu of a response, D took the reins and cracked them against the neck of his steed.

“W-wait! There’s more,” Beatrice said, his voice swiftly dwindling in the distance.

After fifteen minutes of racing down a stretch of road that usually took an hour on horseback, the Hunter could see the buildings of Bossage up ahead. D galloped along on his horse without halting. To people coming and going on Main Street, he might’ve appeared as nothing shy of a black cyclone.

In front of the hotel, he reduced his speed. His left arm went up.

A flesh-colored blob flew from a second-story window. Sticking to the stump of D’s wrist, it completely reattached itself.

“Did it go all right?” the Hunter asked. By then he was already moving at a gallop again.

“Have I ever let you down? That idiot of a mayor still thinks we’re back in the room with girly-name, badmouthing him some more.”

The scornful remarks the mayor had heard through his listening devices had clearly been the result of the left hand’s talent for impersonations. What’s more, it could evidently do two or more voices at the same time.

“How’d things go on your end?”

D only told the hoarse voice about the information Beatrice had given him. Apparently he’d finished reading through the notepad.

The hoarse voice said, “Aren’t you in an all-fired hurry! It’s still not too late to check with somebody else.”

“And hear what would just as likely be lies as the truth,” D replied.

Around him, the wind crumbled away in rapture.

“At any rate, it’s not like you to put complete faith into something before

going into action, so I guess it doesn't matter. But that part where the unholy aura filling the castle picked his pals off one by one sure sounds authentic enough. If the supernatural soldiers from the Florence Highway have come back to life, then that means the grand duke's aura is back, too."

Saying nothing, D merely faced straight ahead. No matter what had returned to life, it wouldn't shake the young man's stern demeanor.

The horse and rider hit the Florence Highway, also known as Mercenary Road. But at present, it would've more accurately been called "Road of the Supernatural Soldiers."

II

Four hundred fifty miles long, the highway had been constructed by a Noble for humans to use. It was said that the Noble, known as Grand Duke Dorleac, lived in a spacious mansion with his beloved wife and son, holding splendid parties there every night and using the nearby humans for their blood . . . until one day five thousand years ago, when a grand military force came and covered the road. That night, while the people cowered in fear of war, there was a clamor of voices ringing out, angry shouts and cries of pain, and a cacophony of gunfire and thundering war horses. In the morning, the road was covered with the corpses of soldiers, and not only the Dorleac family but their extensive retinue as well had vanished from the castle. It wasn't clear what had transpired. But this bizarre occurrence, as if an enormous hand had toppled the soldiers with a deadly gale and carried off the Dorleac clan, made the people cry out in exultation.

However, something remained in the castle. Those who visited it didn't return, and eventually it fell into disrepair and was left to the flow of time. All around the highway people lived, grew old, and died as five millennia went by. Until now . . .

A vermilion hue bled over the edge of the mountains. The final light of the

sinking sun timidly illuminated a farmhouse that stood by the side of the road. D got off his horse in front of it.

“According to the map the mayor gave you, this’d be the Cogeyes’ house. They’re a family of five, but since they haven’t come into Bossage, they’re probably done for,” the hoarse voice remarked.

That would mean that a point only seventy-five miles from town marked the border between the world of humanity and the netherworld. No light spilled from the windows, and no smoke from the family’s supper rose from the chimney. Though there was nothing wrong with the house itself, a weirdness clung to the place. D headed for the front door. Grabbing the doorknob, he pulled.

Doors often had something attached to them to announce the arrival of visitors. In this case it was a bell. Though it would chime even when the wind blew, it didn’t make the slightest sound now.

D went inside. The smell of blood he’d already caught now crushed in around him. The living room lay before him. A sofa, table, and chairs were arranged there. People lay on the ground. Even in the feeble gloom, the carpet was stained with vermilion. One step would undoubtedly wring out some of the lifeblood it’d drunk up from the five bodies.

“The parents and three kids—the youngest being a girl who was all of four? Just a terrible thing to do,” the left hand kvetched in a voice D alone heard. “Whoever did this should die by inches. Now, then—”

D’s right hand flashed into action. Tearing through the blue darkness, a gleaming object flew to the right side of the room—making a thud in the kitchen.

“No response? Next, then,” the left hand continued.

The wind whistled. A second wooden needle went through the doorway directly in front of D, vanishing into the room in the back.

“Next.”

The third one was directed into a room where the walls were covered with bookshelves. It was a study. The needle could be heard jabbing into something.

“Nothing here, either?” the hoarse voice said. “That just leaves out back and the second floor.”

D was already headed for the staircase to his left.

“You send a killing lust out with every one of those needles. Even if it didn’t score a hit, it’d freeze the blood of anyone hiding and almost stop his heart. Not even the most cunning predator could keep from leaping out at something like that. I guess there’s no one here after all.”

D went up the stairs without making a sound. Behind him, the floor just in the center of the cluster of corpses stealthily began to rise. It was a man covered with a cloth that was the same color as the floor. He had a shotgun braced by his hip.

“Nope,” the hoarse voice could be heard to say as they were halfway up the stairs. “There *is* still somebody here!”

As it said this, there was a streak of light.

With a thunderous report, fifteen balls of shot bit into the staircase. As he rose into the air, D swept out with his right hand five times.

Draped in a chameleon sheet—a poncho that could change to blend into any color—the man was already melting back into the floor. However, the instant the needles stitched like white threads through the carpet where he lay, the man let out a choked cry of pain and leapt up from the floor in front of the front door. That was the work of both the needles and D’s murderous air.

Letting out a scream, the man was about to fire a second shot, but before he could do so a sixth needle pierced him through the solar plexus and jabbed out of his back.

Racing over to the man after he’d thudded to the floor, D kicked away the shotgun and pressed the tip of his freshly drawn sword to the man’s throat.

“Get left behind?” asked a hoarse voice that was so different from what the Hunter’s appearance suggested that the waxy-faced man looked up at him. His expression was already a rictus.

D turned his gaze to the man’s abdomen. His shirt was soaked with a larger

bloodstain that had nothing to do with the Hunter's needle. It looked like a stab wound.

"Please . . . you gotta help me . . ." the man pleaded, almost weeping.

"Start talking and we'll get you a doctor," the hoarse voice said.

"There was a fight . . . over getting rid of the hostages . . . and our split of the take . . . I said to kill 'em straightaway . . . and get the hell out of here . . . but Zenon . . . wouldn't listen. So, that being the case . . . I said . . . give me my cut . . . And the next thing I knew . . . he went for me. I didn't . . . put up much of a fight . . . what with my right arm . . . winding up like this."

The man's arm was missing from the elbow down.

"Those bastards . . . left me here . . . with just this sheet . . . and a . . . gun. Told me . . . to slow down . . . anyone chasing 'em . . . Damn them!"

"Where were they going?" D asked.

The man's muddied eyes opened wide. For all his pain, his rictus gave way to a look of rapture.

"Damned if you aren't . . . one hell of a stud. Okay . . . I'll tell you . . . Your looks earn you that much . . . I warrant. They're headed . . . for Dorleac's castle . . . Gonna use . . . the weapons there . . . and machines . . . if any pursuers . . ."

The man's voice suddenly died out. Still, he struggled desperately to keep his eyelids open.

"I'm . . . Scuda. Before I go . . . could you give me . . . your name . . . ?"

"D."

And saying that, he nailed the murderer's throat to the floor with his blade.

"He had that coming to him. He could hide, but he couldn't do anything to disguise his fear or killing lust. We saw that he was blending in with the floor ages ago," said the hoarse voice.

Sheathing his blade, D raised his left hand. He gazed at his palm. A bizarre face appeared.

"You'd better hurry after 'em . . . At least, that's what I'd normally tell you, but

up ahead it's swarming with supernatural soldiers. See? You can feel the unearthly air gusting off 'em! Luckily, if the legends are correct, they'll only be covering the highway and its immediate vicinity. Towns and farms far from it should be safe, but if we collect those four robbers—I guess that'd be *three* now—and rescue any survivors there may or may not be, getting 'em back alive is gonna be tougher than tough. On your own, you'd probably manage something, but you'll have all of them for baggage. It'll be easier for you if there aren't any survivors. Kill the other three robbers and the grand duke, and that'll be the end of it. Oof!"

Squeezing his left hand tight, D stepped outside. He believed that after massacring this family, the three outlaws had galloped off toward the highway that was crawling with supernatural soldiers. The question was: Would they live long enough to make it to the ruins—the castle of the vampire Dorleac? On the off chance that they did, they would undoubtedly find something waiting there that was more fearsome than death.

Whatever D's fate, he would accept it without complaint.

Once he'd mounted his cyborg horse, something white flowed out in front of him. Fog.

"Here they come, at last. Watch yourself," the hoarse voice advised.

D broke into a gallop. Fog and air brushed his skin, tearing apart and sailing away.

It was through his ultrakeen senses that D realized something was flying at him from up ahead. The longsword glided from his back to meet it. Even in the fog, the silvery streak streamed out—and whatever it hit was struck down with a beautiful ringing sound.

Looking down at what lay on the ground, the hoarse voice muttered, "Blow darts?"

The weapons had conical bodies tipped with needles about eight inches long. Unlike arrows, they didn't make a sound, meaning they were fearsome weapons of assassination at close range, but D knew that those who'd launched these were far off in the distance.

What about the second volley?

The heels of the Hunter's boots struck the barrel of his horse, and rider and steed sailed through the air as if they were one. They were so beautiful, even the fog seemed to laud them. The instant they touched back down they broke into a full gallop. All of the blow darts aimed at the cyborg horse had passed right under it.

"If they take out your horse, we'll be in a world of hurt. Seems the darts used by the mercenaries holding down the Florence Highway are coated with poison. Get off the road!"

Even before the voice told him this, D was tugging the reins to the left. Batting down three batches of blow darts, he got his steed running at a diagonal once they were down onto the plain. However, the fog showed no sign of clearing, leaving his field of view an endless expanse of white. D had nothing to rely on but his instincts. For perhaps thirty minutes he rode parallel to the road.

The fog unexpectedly cleared.

D narrowed his eyes.

"I'll be damned!" the hoarse voice exclaimed. "What's all this? They were able to fool you and me both?"

The cyborg horse had galloped up to the front of the same farmhouse they'd just left.

"Seems like being stuck in that fog numbs your sense of direction. Sent us right back where we started, eh?"

"Can you get rid of it?" D asked.

"More or less. Even if I said I couldn't, you'd make me do it anyway, wouldn't you? Hey, do you hear that?"

D nodded.

"They're laughing! Calling you an idiot to fall for that so easily," the hoarse voice said, and his remark seemed to carry both reproach and encouragement.

The cyborg horse tore at the ground—this time, they didn't divert to the plains. They headed straight for the highway. The fog surged toward them. Like a

sentient being, it took shape, engulfing the horse and rider from all sides. Just as D was about to meld with the whiteness, he looked like a person being caught in a tremendous wave.

It was at this second the incident occurred.

The fog flowed toward a certain spot. The spot moved with the same speed as the galloping cyborg horse, creating a shape like a gigantic funnel. The whirling fog was now being sucked into its own vortex. A minute later, the last of the fog had been consumed—during which time D raced a mile and a quarter, and even now he continued on at breakneck speed.

Countless presences were in motion to either side of him—the source of the blow darts. The ones who'd summoned the perplexing fog. It could be none other than the supernatural soldiers.

"Here they come! Now things are getting interesting," the hoarse voice said, sounding excited.

More than his eyes, D relied on his hearing, but beyond that he was counting on a sort of sixth sense to locate his foes. The reanimated mercenaries couldn't have had time to seal off the entire highway yet. Undoubtedly the forces hindering him at present were merely part of a scouting party. If there were military units, there would also have to be a chain of command. D's intent was to destroy the core of that command structure.

Blow darts rained down on him from either side.

D raised his left hand. The human face that rose to its surface was plastered with an unsettling grin.

Whitish smoke enveloped D and his steed. This new white fog swallowed the blow darts that were aimed precisely at the horse and rider. D knew all the darts that flew into the fog would vanish. Just as the first fog had beguiled D's sense of direction, the white fog billowing from his left hand was throwing the blow darts off course. It was precisely because of this that D had dared to ride down the middle of the highway.

"What's this?" the left hand said in a purposeful tone.

D knew just what it was talking about.

Roughly five hundred yards ahead of them sat an object of incredible mass.

“They’re better armed than I thought. They’ve taken up a position there!”

“Can you confuse them?”

“That’ll depend on the opposition, I guess,” the hoarse voice said gravely.

The meaning of this was immediately apparent. A white cloud billowed toward them once again from up ahead. When the other fog collided with their own, it lost its ability to confuse.

Batting down the blow darts flying at him, D made his mount take a great leap.

He easily cleared what appeared to be a seven-foot-high barricade looming before him. Constructed of steel pipes strung with iron netting, it was a tried-and-true arrangement.

As soon as they touched back down to earth, the fog vanished. The Hunter's left hand wasn't expelling it any longer . . . but not due to any instructions from D. They were simply on the same wavelength.

Figures in gray uniforms ran everywhere, trying to flee. They'd never expected D to break through like that. The attack that followed couldn't have lasted ten seconds from start to finish. That was all it took to decide the victor.

D didn't look at the foes around him. His target loomed about ten yards ahead. It called to mind the bridge of an ancient ship haphazardly covered with iron plates. Windows and loopholes for weapons dotted its lumpy surface with complete disregard for matters of physics or aesthetics, and it bristled with guns and cannons that made it look as menacing as a porcupine.

But even before these weapons turned toward him, D was leaping from the back of his horse.

III

It was more like a fortress than a tank. Still, it was oddly constructed. Not only were there pits and bumps all over it to assist in climbing, but hatches were scattered across its surface.

D drifted back down and was reaching for the handle of the hatch by his feet when the gun beside it swiveled in his direction. The muzzle was nearly three inches across. A direct hit would blow even D to pieces. His left hand grabbed it.

The gun was driven by a motor of several horsepower. But the Hunter easily forced it downward—that was the sort of unnatural strength his left hand possessed.

A shot howled from the gun. Neither the earsplitting roar nor the impact drew so much as a blink from D, but he saw flames and dirt shoot into the air. Using

the hem of his coat to bat away the blow darts flying at him from below, the Hunter yanked on the hatch. One after another, the bolts shot free.

Apparently those down below were somewhat prepared. At the same time the heavy hatch was ripped off as if it were paper, a soldier with pistol in hand poked his head out. His bloodless waxwork of a face was as expressionless as a mask.

Before his opponent could take aim, D caught him by the collar. Without time to even draw a breath, the soldier was jerked out and discarded. Arms and legs flapping all the while, he landed some thirty feet away. By then the figure in black had slipped into the fortification.

Gunshots echoed and screams rang out. Soldiers who'd been running through the position in confusion rushed toward the tank. The instant they reached the hatch, a flash of black lightning flew out. In midair it transformed into D, with the hem of his coat spread like a pair of wings. The sword in his right hand glittered as his beauty made the supernatural soldiers look up in a daze.

Before D landed, the great fortress of a tank exploded. The blast and shrapnel mowed through the soldiers and blew away the barricade. After D touched down, the swelling flames surged toward him. His left hand came up.

Just look. Blistering flames of thousands if not tens of thousands of degrees formed a neat little stream that was sucked up by his palm. The speed with which it happened was frightening. The gout of flame that'd closed to within three feet of D ultimately disappeared without ever actually touching him.

Standing there perfectly straight, D surveyed his surroundings. The supernatural soldiers who lay on the ground were fading, one after another. Their shapes crumbled, they became masses of gas, and then the wind scattered them.

"So, even those who've died once can die again?" the left hand remarked, letting a belch escape.

Spotting a lone figure writhing some fifteen feet away, D approached him.

Though his basic features were human, it was unsettling the way the soldier's face remained expressionless despite his obvious pain.

"If something isn't done, you're gonna die," the hoarse voice said. "Answer

some questions, and I'll fix you up. Tell me who brought you jokers back to life, and what they're after."

Though the soldier lacked lips, he feebly worked a bare crack of a mouth, saying in a mechanical tone, "So . . . I'm dying?"

"That's right."

"I don't really understand . . . Have I . . . done that . . . before?"

"Yep."

"I don't get it . . . I'm not afraid . . . at all . . . Are people normally . . . afraid?"

"You bet."

"I was brought back . . . to fight . . . So if I can no longer fight . . . nothing remains but to die."

"Then tell us who brought you back, and what they want. You can keep on living!"

The green, glassy eyes of the soldier reflected D's handsome visage. Pupils that had lost their vitality suddenly regained their luster.

"You're . . . beautiful," he said with a parched mouth. "So lovely . . . I . . . want to live now."

"Then you'd better talk."

"Don't want . . . to die . . . Please . . . save me . . . We were . . . brought back by . . ."

"Yes?" the left hand said, coming closer to his mouth—and then the hand found itself placed on his chest.

The soldier twitched. These were his death throes. In less than two seconds' time, his body had turned to gas and lent a white tinge to the wind.

"We're too late," the hoarse voice said morosely. "It seems your face brought feelings back into him right before the end. Scary what a looker can do, ain't it? Gaaah!"

Keeping his clenched fist down, D stood up. Nothing about the remnants of the tank or barricade was any different.

“They just threw these together from whatever they could find. But what’s really scary is—”

“Soldiers who’ve forgotten what death is?” D said, his voice casting a pall over the world of carnage.

Apparently the hoarse voice hadn’t learned its lesson.

“That’s right. No use threatening ’em. But maybe if you were to give ’em a kiss —gaaah!”

As he was squeezing his fist twice as tightly as before, D heard something approaching from the rear. It was his cyborg horse.

D quickly became a vision of beauty astride his steed.

“It’s a hard road! Wonder what kind of clowns will be waiting for us next? Scary, ain’t it?”

Naturally, D made a fist for a third time, and then started off on his horse.

After the Hunter had continued on for about thirty miles, what appeared to be a factory came into view to the left of the road.

“This is supposed to be an abandoned geoflow power plant. What have we here?”

Black smoke was rising from a rusty chimney on the factory. Even from a few miles away, D’s ears could catch the sounds of activity in the plant.

As D focused his gaze on the objects constructed around the building, the hoarse voice asked him, “You know what those are?”

“Mobile missile launchers.”

“Bingo! That plant’s another one of their posts. But what’s that sound? Why would they put the plant back into operation? Whatever the case, we’ll have to make a detour.”

D didn’t reply. His dark eyes were trained on something else.

From behind the factory, an old-fashioned motorcar resembling some sort of beetle had begun speeding toward him. Just behind it, three identical cars and

what appeared to be an armored vehicle were in hot pursuit.

“What’s all this?”

“Doesn’t look to be an internal squabble.”

Even before D spoke, he’d spurred his horse into a gallop. The old-fashioned motorcar’s top speed was just under a hundred miles per hour; D pushed his steed at exactly the same pace. In less than thirty seconds he crossed paths with the car. D went by without stopping.

Out of the corner of his eye he’d caught a glimpse of the driver’s profile through the windshield. It was a girl with golden hair. He could see the faces of the supernatural soldiers in the three small pursuing cars. All looked the same—like mannequins. Each had a glittering longsword in hand as the cars closed on D.

All four of their paths came together at a single point. The three vehicles rolled in rapid succession. Every last soldier had been beheaded.

Challenging the armored vehicle without pausing for a second, D must’ve looked like a mirage as he rode past. A cloud of dust appeared behind him. The armored vehicle had fired its gun.

Just before flames and clouds of sand could envelop them, D and his cyborg horse made a mighty bound. In midair they shifted and flew right at the armored car.

Overhead, they heard a familiar sound. The instant D and his cyborg horse landed, the recognizable whistle became a song of destruction. As D pulled the reins to bring his steed down on one side, shock waves, flames, and death whizzed over his head. The horse stayed still, but D got up and looked back the way he’d just come.

A black speck was approaching from the far reaches of the highway. As he watched, it took the shape of an oversized jeep. It halted beside D, and the man in the driver’s seat grinned.

“Never thought D of all people would try to leave us high and dry.”

It was Strider.

From the passenger’s side, Stanza glared at the Hunter, saying, “You try our

faith in you.”

The right side of the jeep had a rocket launcher that looked like an oblong tombstone, while the left side was equipped with a three-shot bazooka. The barrel of said bazooka now smoked from recent shots.

“Oh, the cavalry’s here,” the hoarse voice said sarcastically.

“You’re one to talk, running off without us,” Strider said, banging his fist against the steering wheel. “Didn’t the mayor order you to take us with you? You’re a lousy double-dealer!”

“Then don’t work with the double-dealer,” D said.

Strider snorted at this.

“The two of you should do well together. Go give them hell.”

Stanza’s eyes bulged in their sockets.

“Now just a minute! There’s no reason to go saying things like that. May I remind you that *we* were the ones who just destroyed that armored car?”

“I never asked you to do that.”

D’s reply put a spark of malice in the warrior woman’s eyes. Her right hand glided toward her hip.

“Knock it off,” Strider said to her. “All that aside, who’s that?”

The eyes of all three focused on the motorcar that was approaching from the rear.

“Came back, did she?” the hoarse voice said.

A sound rained down on them from overhead.

“Run for it! It’s a missile!”

At the same moment Strider stepped on the gas, an explosion occurred just five yards to their right. The jeep rolled onto its side. D had already spun around.

“Help them!” Strider shouted, having been thrown clear of the jeep, along with Stanza. His cries were lost in the succession of explosions.

Catching the shock waves on its underside, the jeep spun once in the air over

the warriors' heads before falling to the ground. They could see countless vehicles raising a cloud of dust as they approached from the factory.

Dismounting, D raced over to the jeep, which was still on its side. Pulling the rocket launcher's remote control from the vehicle's dashboard, he stared straight ahead.

"Don't waste your time with that. Help whoever's in that car!" Strider shouted angrily.

The jeep's missiles had to be targeted manually. Eliminating multiple opponents in one fell swoop would clearly be impossible without taking precise aim.

Suddenly, the rocket launcher disgorged flames and white smoke. At least twenty missiles were sent off simultaneously. It was unclear whether they scored direct hits, because the flames from the exploding missiles engulfed every last enemy vehicle. Within this ugly orange fireball, more flames shot up—precisely the same number as the count of enemy cars.

"I don't believe it—every damn one of 'em . . ." the stunned Strider groaned.

Ignoring him, D fired one last shot.

Leaving a white trail behind it, the missile entered the factory building.

The resulting explosion rocked heaven and earth. A pillar of flame rose into the sky. D, Strider, Stanza, the jeep, and even the motorcar were sent flying. First the jeep and the car landed, followed by the three people and the cyborg horse a good distance away.

IRENE

CHAPTER 4

I

Strider and Stanza both curled up to escape the blast, then spread their arms and legs against the ground on landing. That was the best way to distribute the force of the impact. Above them, white-hot shrapnel, shards of melted glass, and globs of silicon flew through the air. A number of them landed on the armored plates on the warriors' backs, which managed to protect them.

As soon as the blast and the threat of falling debris had passed, Strider and Stanza picked themselves up. Shielding their eyes against the still-eddying dust and wind, they looked for D and the motorcar. Off in the distance, the hem of the Hunter's black coat fluttered. D was already beside the toppled vehicle.

"He got the drop on us again? I hate it when that happens!" Strider growled.

Glancing at the factory that'd been reduced to flaming wreckage as they broke into a run, they finally reached D just as the girl was crawling out from under the toppled vehicle. Though the face framed by her golden hair had gone pale and a trickle of blood came from her left temple, there was no disguising her youthful vigor.

The first thing Stanza asked was, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," the girl answered in a faint voice, staring at the three of them. The emotions coloring her face were hardly suited to someone who'd just been rescued. They showed distrust and suspicion.

"You folks—are you Hunters?" This was the second thing she said.

"The smirking bastard behind me and I are both warriors. But the guy in black's a Hunter."

“Thank you—I’m glad I came back.” Though she’d finally gotten around to thanking them, she didn’t sound particularly grateful. “You came from Bossage, didn’t you? Get me back there as quick as you can.”

“Well, aren’t you the impatient little lady! Fill us in first. You know, you’re not the only one we came out here to rescue.”

“That’s right,” Strider said, grinning at the girl whose expression had turned to stone. “I’m Strider, and this scary lady is Miss Stanza.”

He noticed a change come over the girl. Her blue eyes opened wide, and her expression seemed to melt with rapture. It went without saying that it was the young man in black that was reflected in her glazed eyes.

“And you’re . . . ?” she asked in a voice that sounded as if she could weep.

“D,” he simply replied. “Tell us everything you know. Then you can head back to town.”

“Okay . . . if it’s for *you*.”

“Hey!” Strider snapped. “I’ll have you know he wasn’t the only one involved in rescuing you, missy!”

Grabbing his arm to restrain him, Stanza said, “You’re wasting your breath. He didn’t use hypnotism or anything, but the girl’s soul belongs to him. You’ve got us beat there, D. But you’d better share her intel with us.”

“Not a chance.”

“*What* did you say?”

“We’re not partners.”

“Hey, wait a minute!”

“Yeah—don’t push your luck, D!”

The Hunter told the flustered pair, “Right now, the two of you have formed an alliance. But you’re not allied with me. That’s all there is to it.”

The pair fell silent, and D didn’t seem to even see them anymore.

“Get on,” he said, indicating his cyborg horse.

The girl gave a meek nod. Apparently staying with the gorgeous Hunter would be even better than going back to town.

“Just a second!” Stanza said, making the girl halt in her tracks. “You’re not even going to tell the people who saved your life what your name is?”

The warrior’s hands hung easily by her sides. But it went without saying that she had deadly darts concealed behind her extended fingers.

“We’re not going to let you hog all the glory, D!”

“Damned straight!” Strider added, circling around behind D. As the warrior reached for his longsword, his face was filled with a dark and unconcealable will to kill.

They were both ready to follow through. If D responded in kind, there would certainly be a breathtaking battle to the death. And D was almost certain to respond.

In a part of the wasteland where winds of death gusted clouds of dust, all the figures were frozen solid by an overwhelming killing lust. But it was one unexpected word that brought them back to the world of normalcy. “Okay,” someone had said. And that someone was D.

Stanza looked puzzled. Strider’s eyes were wide. The killing lust had vanished without a trace—in part because the two warriors were reluctant to fight D.

“For the time being, we’ll stick together.”

Strider gave a hearty nod at D’s words, hiding how shaken he was. “Fine, as long as we’re clear on that. Now, let’s go somewhere and hear her tale.”

“I already told you to take me back to town!” the girl said in an exasperated manner. Apparently the killing lust had broken D’s spell over her.

“How about introducing yourself first?” Stanza said, glaring at the young woman.

“I’m Irene. Irene Slocum.”

“You’re part of the farming family that sent word to the mayor about the mercenaries coming back to life?”

“That’s right.”

At this point, the same thought popped into all three heads: Wasn’t the girl concerned about her family?

“At any rate, we should get moving,” Strider said, looking at the smoldering remains of the factory.

“Not far from here, there’s an emergency bunker in case of things like tornadoes or volcanoes. I don’t think anyone would have any complaints if we let ourselves in.”

The high end of the bunker where the entrance was located was a pile of cyclopean stones. Its door was an iron plate. A heavy lock hung on it.

“We’ve got trouble. The lock is keyed to fingerprints,” Strider clucked.

Such locks weren’t extremely rare, and they were used from time to time in important places like storehouses for a village’s food or treasure. The fingerprint that opened it would belong to the acting mayor, and if he or she died, the fingerprint would be updated.

“This chain’s too heavy—I guess we’ve got no choice but to blow it, eh?” Strider continued. “The combat jeep’s a loaner from the town of Bossage, but it’s carrying some dynamite.”

An exquisite hand reached out in front of the warrior—D’s left hand. The other three saw it close around the lock. Their eyes were saying that he was an idiot and this would never work. Even after they heard the lock click, the gleam of doubt didn’t immediately fade from their eyes.

Ignoring the dumbly staring trio, D took off the lock and chain, and then effortlessly opened the iron door.

“Are dhampirs freaking monsters or what?” Strider could be heard muttering behind the Hunter’s back.

The bunker had a central chamber large enough for a good three hundred people to sleep there, plus stores of food and water, and toilets. While this was the Frontier, assistance from other towns or villages would still reach them

within ten days.

In the central chamber, Irene began to tell them her story. Although it was obvious that she wanted to go back to town right away, she hadn't been able to sway the other three.

According to the girl, about thirty minutes before he sent word to Bossage, her father was making his morning rounds when he spotted odd troops coming down the highway and raced back. After sending word to town, he'd loaded his family into a trailer and fled, leaving one of them behind.

"Me," Irene said in a self-deprecating fashion.

"Why, were you too slow or something?"

"I guess so."

"That sure was cold of your family. I don't care if they were in a hurry—they should've noticed right off they were shy one person. And they didn't come back for you?"

"I guess not."

Strider said mockingly, "I don't suppose you'd be the black sheep of the family by any chance, would you?"

"Oh, you're right on that account. But what's it to you? I've still got a home and a family, anyway. At least I'm not some killer vagrant going around murdering people for money!"

"Come again?" Strider growled, the look in his eye changing.

Though Irene was obviously frightened, she didn't back away. "You got a problem with me?" she replied, baring her teeth.

This wasn't the sort of thing the average farm girl would do. But if she were average, she clearly wouldn't have been able to steal a car from right under the supernatural soldiers' noses and make her escape, either.

"While I was getting my stuff together, everyone else took off, so I headed toward town on foot. Then those jerks came, and they captured me."

Putting her in the old-fashioned motorcar she was driving earlier, the

supernatural soldiers had brought Irene back to the abandoned factory. On seeing its interior, Irene had been stunned. When she was little, she'd gone out to the abandoned building any number of times and peeked inside, but now it seemed like an entirely different place. The rusting, derelict machines and power transformers had all vanished, and now gigantic devices of unknown purpose were being assembled. Electrical discharges coursed through the air, striking some soldiers during their labors and knocking them to the floor. Most likely they'd been constructing a reactor or something similar. The terrible devastation the group had witnessed lent credence to this.

Irene had been brought to a room within the factory.

"Oh? And what happened to you there?" Strider jeered. His expression as he licked his chops made clear the perversions he was imagining.

The girl's gaze bored through his face. Her eyes were like fire.

"What do you mean by *that*?"

"Exactly what I said," Strider replied, his tone even more mocking now. "Those guys had no damned need to keep you alive. Which means they could only have one use for you. You've got a tight little body there, you know."

Irene started to pounce as soon as she noticed that the warrior's eyes were focused on the impressive mounds straining against her shirt. However, before she could strike Strider in the chest, he gave her wrists a little twist and the girl let out a scream.

"You're kinda tough, but don't let that go to your head, missy. If we have to, we'll be only too glad to hand your ass back to those lousy soldiers."

But the warrior's reprimand abruptly halted.

Stanza turned around with such speed, it was as if she'd just received an electric shock. Following her gaze, Strider's eyes also went wide with terror.

What radiated from D was a hair-raising air of the supernatural.

"She didn't finish her story," he said, his voice that of a gorgeous specter. Perhaps that was exactly how he appeared to everyone else there.

"Well, I just thought this cheeky little bitch needed to be—"

“Later,” D replied curtly.

A short response would suffice. But what if it was the wrong response? What if the warrior wouldn’t cooperate?

“Sheesh,” Strider spat, letting go of the girl.

As the girl turned her malice-tinged eyes toward him, D told her, “Continue.”

II

The rest of Irene’s tale was brief. After being kept in the room and provided with food and water for five days and nights, she’d finally managed to escape.

“One of them forgot to lock the door. What an idiot!”

As Irene wore a look of contempt on her face, the other three rapidly fired questions at her. Most important among those were the questions of who’d resurrected the supernatural soldiers, and for what purpose.

Irene’s response was three simple words: “I don’t know.” She told them the soldiers hadn’t said a single word about it.

“Did anyone other than you survive?” Strider asked.

“When I was pretending to be asleep, I heard the two guards outside my door talking about somebody fleeing to the grand duke’s castle. I don’t know how many fled or who they were. I just pray it wasn’t my family.”

“If they escape to the castle, the soldiers won’t follow them. It’s a kind of sanctuary.”

No one there disputed Strider’s statement.

“Okay, that settles what our next move is. It’s off to the castle.”

As Strider got a reckless look on his face, Irene’s color drained, and she asked him, “Why do we have to go all the way out there? Wasn’t the plan for you to bring me back to town?”

“We can’t do that, missy,” Strider replied, giving her a strangely gentle pat on

the shoulder. “See, our job is to rescue *everyone* who’s escaped the soldiers’ clutches. We can’t put that on hold just for little old you.”

“But I’m one of the people who escaped from them! Take me back to town, already!”

“Sorry, but you’ll have to go back alone.”

“That’s crazy! What am I supposed to do if I run into those creeps?”

“Don’t worry. Pretty boy there and the two of us got rid of them all.”

“No way am I going back all alone. If they were to catch me again . . .”

An intense fear drained the blood from the girl’s face.

“Then come with us.”

“What?”

“It’s not like you have another option. You’re one of the people we’re supposed to rescue. I’ll take real good care of you.”

“Who in their right mind would want you to—”

“Let’s go,” Stanza said to her. They were the first words the woman had spoken since reaching the bunker.

“But I—”

Irene was confused. She had no confidence in the chances of returning safely on her own. But if she went on, they’d be diving right into the thick of the supernatural troops. Still, she’d probably be better off with these three than by herself. As the girl’s eyes honed in on D, they seemed to melt away in rapture again.

D said, “Go back alone.”

“Excuse me?” Strider exclaimed stupidly.

Stanza merely gave D a look of suspicion. “Why?”

“She’ll just be in the way,” D replied, getting right to the point.

“But this girl’s one of the people we’re supposed to rescue!” Strider said.

“That’s right.” Stanza agreed. “Our reward covers her, too. I’m not about to let

it go to waste.”

“We’ve already rescued her. There are no soldiers behind us. She could make her way back with her eyes closed.”

“No, not on your life!” Irene said, backing away. Circling around behind one of the cylindrical pillars, she continued shaking her head.

“If you run into the enemy on your way back, just chalk it up to bad luck.”

As D pelted her with one heartless remark after another, Irene could only stare dumbfounded at his lips. This man was about to abandon her, yet she couldn’t hate him. The young man’s beauty was such that it undermined her emotions with confounding ease.

“My mind is made up. I’m going with you.”

“Yeah, you should do that,” Strider said with a nod.

“Make her go,” said D.

“We’re all supposed to be on the same team,” Stanza interjected. “So that makes it two votes against your one. Majority rule.”

Silence flowed by.

“Do as you like,” D said in a resigned tone. He had two “partners,” and more baggage. In all truth, it probably didn’t matter either way. “But you two are responsible for looking after her.”

“Understood,” Stanza said before turning to face the girl. “You don’t have any weapons, do you?”

Not even waiting for Irene to shake her head in reply, she pulled an old-fashioned gunpowder revolver from one of her coat’s inner pockets and put it into the girl’s pale hand.

“Just pull the trigger and you can get off six shots. It’s got a pretty good kick to it, so take aim well. For a beginner, about fifteen feet’s a good range. Let them get close before you fire. Don’t be scared—got it?”

Nodding, Irene tucked the weapon through the belt on her slacks. Perhaps she was at peace with the weapon, because her movements were calm.

“Let’s get a move on,” Strider said, getting to his feet.

D was already headed toward the door.

Just then, heaven and earth shook. Cracks shot through the concrete-reinforced ceiling and walls, and pieces of them started to rain down.

“Wh—what the hell is going on?” Strider stammered, batting away falling concrete with the tip of his longsword’s sheath.

“Bombing, I take it,” said Stanza. Her eyes were turned up toward the ceiling, as if evaluating its strength. “I heard something about that a long time ago. They say the ancient mercenaries who covered the Florence Highway attacked the enemy from the sky. They’re doing it again, I guess.”

At that very moment, the biggest blast yet knocked D back from the doorway. The lights in the ceiling faded. Shock waves plowed across the central chamber.

In the darkness, a light sparked to life. Was it the work of D, or one of the warriors?

Actually, it wasn’t any of the three.

“Is everybody okay?” Irene asked. Though she still lay on the floor, her right hand was raised, and it held a lit fire cord.

“More or less,” Strider replied.

“It’s a good thing you had that with you,” Stanza called out from not far away.

“Nights on the Frontier are too dangerous not to have some source of fire. I had it stashed in my shoe. Can you walk?” the girl asked, and just then another blast assailed them.

The ceiling made an unsettling sound. Cracks formed.

“If we don’t hurry up and get out of here, we’ll be buried alive!” Strider said, his shadowy form getting back up.

“The enemy intends to do just that. And if we go out, they’ll kill us!” said Stanza.

As if to deliver the coup de grâce, a voice of iron informed them, “The entrance has been sealed off.”

“What are we supposed to do, then? Isn’t there any other way out?”

The question was directed at Irene.

“No.”

“Shit!”

“At least, not a *regular* way.”

Irene’s form and the flame flowed along. Away from the entrance.

Where the floor met the wall, there was one spot that had a natural-looking bump. When Irene reached out for it and applied pressure, it easily spun around, sliding back into the depths of the wall. The eyes of the four were greeted by a new cavern just big enough for an adult to squeeze through.

“Go,” Strider said, giving Irene a push.

Perhaps used to doing things like this, the girl quickly scurried into the hole like an insect.

“See you,” Strider said, smirking as he made his way in.

With a wry grin, Stanza remarked, “Aren’t you the gentleman. Are *you* set?”

Shrugging her shoulders at the silent D, Stanza slipped into the hole.

On the other side of the hole was a slanting passageway. It was rather steep. Crawling forward on hands and knees, the warrior immediately began to slip. Just then, there was a roar behind her and she felt the blast.

“D!” Stanza shouted, just managing to turn her head, but she saw only a cloud of dust blowing in, and then she slid down the steep incline. Unexpectedly, it opened up before her. Below, she could make out figures.

I’m gonna fall, Stanza thought, and she curled into a ball at that instant. She could judge the height of the fall by the distance of the figures. Doing a flip, she executed a remarkable landing.

Seemingly chasing her, dust rained down from overhead. Leaping out of the way, Stanza looked up. Apparently it was coming from a hole in the wall about ten feet above her. Whether going head or feet first, the average person probably would’ve been injured by the fall. But her skills as a warrior had saved

her.

They were in a cylindrical chamber that was about fifteen feet high.

“D didn’t make it in time?” Strider asked, his voice beside her.

Stanza nodded. She then changed gears. Turning to where Irene stood next to an elliptical hole, she asked, “Where are we?”

“I don’t know. My grandfather told me this was here back before the emergency bunker was built. He said it was the home of some ancient race that used to live nearby.”

Stanza surveyed their surroundings. Though she’d thought the walls were made of stone, on closer inspection, she found they had the smooth surface of black earth. She’d heard that in civil engineering projects they used chemicals to harden the dirt and prevent cave-ins, but in this case the soil literally seemed to have been turned to stone. She touched it. Her fingertips found the surface cold and hard. It was definitely stone. Stanza couldn’t imagine what kind of technology could achieve such a result.

“There’d be no surviving that. Not even for a dhampir. Let’s get going,” Strider urged them.

The trio began walking toward the hole. Above them, slight tremors traveled through the ground. Apparently the supernatural soldiers even now continued their bombardment.

III

Leaving the chamber, they found a passageway tall enough to stand in that ran on and on. Like the chamber, the walls, floor, and ceiling here all gave off a glow, so visibility was no problem. When the soil had been transformed into stone, some luminescent substance had undoubtedly been added to it.

“This *is* gonna get us outta here, isn’t it?” Strider said skeptically.

Up in the front, Irene bluntly replied that they’d be fine. After this, she didn’t answer any more of his questions.

“What now?” Strider groaned.

Irene had halted. A stone wall loomed before her. It was a dead end.

“Hey, what the hell are you trying to pull?” the warrior said, his hand going for his longsword’s scabbard, but Stanza clapped him on the shoulder to stop him.

“She wouldn’t have taken us this way if she couldn’t get out.”

“Right you are,” Irene said, breaking into a grin. “There’s no regular escape route, but there happens to be a special one.”

Picking up a rock at her feet, she threw it as hard as she could at the wall to her left. The part that began to recede was about six feet high by six feet wide.

“Climb through there and you can get out. Get going.”

Taking a single step, Strider halted and said, “Get going? What are *you* gonna do?”

“Don’t worry about me anymore.”

The pair of warriors finally noticed something strange about the girl’s tone of voice. But it was a kind of strangeness that they understood.

“She’s possessed,” Stanza said, looking to all sides of them. Quiet was returning to the passageway.

“Ever since we came in here, I’ve felt this tingling in my spine—hey, what are you gonna do?”

“You can get out through there. But if you do, you’ll have to leave the matter of the girl completely to me,” said Stanza.

“I really can’t do that.”

“In that case, tag along behind us.”

She said this because Irene was leading the way. Wondering what to do next, the female warrior stared at the girl’s face, which retained some of its youthful innocence.

Finally, Irene reached out her left hand and touched the wall of earth turned to stone. This time, it didn’t open up. Instead, Irene walked toward the wall. When her body sank into its surface, the pair she’d left behind realized the magic at

play there. Without hesitation, they headed for the earthen wall. They met no resistance as they passed through it.

“The wall’s an illusion?”

“There has to be a holographic projector around here somewhere. That ancient race must’ve been pretty scary,” Stanza replied, but she didn’t look scared at all.

The pair began walking down a passageway just like the one they’d been in. Presently, the sound of rushing water became audible.

“Is that an underground river?” said Strider, his words like a moan.

They came to another chamber. The bodies of both warriors were bathed in a white glow. If there’d been heat to accompany it, they’d have known it was from a form of combustion.

“What’s this?” Strider mused, his voice dissolving in the white light.

Oddly enough, he could gauge distances quite well now. Irene stood about ten feet ahead of him. Another fifteen feet beyond her was the source of the light, a light that didn’t stop at merely providing illumination.

“It’s moving,” Stanza muttered, as if she were talking in her sleep.

The light was flowing. Clearly possessing mass, it shifted from left to right. It made the pair of warriors think of the strange metaphor of a rushing torrent of viscous soup. What’s more—

“There’s something inside it!” Strider pointed out, almost whispering.

Stanza nodded. “People!”

Now the eyes of the pair were catching the delicate shifts in the glow the light produced. The light gave rise to forms. And those forms were human in shape.

“Is this some sort of joke?” Strider said, giving voice to his question.

The answer wasn’t verbalized.

This is a subterranean energy flow. The words that echoed in the brains of the two warriors came from Irene’s psyche. *The plant above it only succeeded in tapping a small portion of its power, but this is its main concentration. By now,*

the two of you must realize what it is.

The pair of warriors nodded. It would be safe to say they'd never been more certain of anything in their lives. This was a rushing torrent of rancor. The quality of the energy that pierced their armor and sank into their flesh told them as much.

This subterranean energy had been created by something that lived here before the Nobility built their society, probably even before the birth of human civilization. Obviously that race was well versed in the darkness harbored by the human psyche, and the power it could produce. And that was why they'd created this. Over tens of thousands of years, they'd taken hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of lives as sacrificial offerings. All had been killed in the cruelest manners imaginable. There had been no honor or pride in being an offering to a god, merely a painful and protracted death. And it was safe to say that it'd proved successful.

All the people they'd tortured to death had been full of malice: For those who were taking their lives. For the compatriots that survived them. For their families. For a god that wouldn't save them from a hellish death. For every other living thing. Undoubtedly the death bringers had possessed the means of transforming that malice into energy. The rancor of the dead then became a subterranean energy flow that benefited the ancient race. It burned the enemies who descended on them, leveled mountains to crush the living, and froze heaven and earth alike to take the lives of hundreds of billions of creatures. Battles ultimately come down to attrition. But loss had no meaning when dealing with a hatred that couldn't be erased. Enemies that stormed in with superior numbers were all slain, and the race took pride in their invincibility.

Even after that race was no more, the torrent of malice and rancor coursed relentlessly through the bowels of the earth, occasionally erupting on the surface after tectonic shifts and drowning those it met. Thirty thousand years before, a certain group learned of the existence of the malevolent force, and after a thousand years and many generations, they finally succeeded in sealing it away, and the energy had flowed deep in the earth ever since. A mining facility that'd been built on the surface not long ago managed to tap a small portion of that trapped energy, but with no way to control the rancor, the facility had

ultimately been destroyed.

And now a girl and two warriors had come into contact with the fearsome flow. They heard it. The angry voices of all those sacrifices. Cries of anguish from their death throes. A swollen hatred without a focus. And delight.

The voices told the trio to join them.

Irene turned around. Her hand came up. From the wrist to the fingertips it slowly curled and uncurled.

“She’s beckoning to us,” Strider said in a fuzzy tone. The look in his eyes had changed. “This is serious . . . We’ve gotta run for it.”

“You’re right.”

They couldn’t even converse in an ordinary fashion any longer.

Irene was calling to them. Behind her, figures beyond numbering had come into view. And as they flowed by, they called out. They beckoned. *Come to us*, they said.

This is bad, Strider thought in the depths of his brain, keeping himself from speaking.

Mustn’t go, Stanza heard herself say. Despite that, her legs were moving. Her body was no longer under her control. It was a strange feeling, one she’d never had before.

And so they both walked toward the light. They took their place beside Irene.

A smile rose on the girl’s lips. It was difficult to imagine that such an evil grin could lurk in the depths of a human heart.

The two warriors returned the smile. Their grins were equally wicked.

Together, the three stepped forward. Into the light.

They sensed something behind them . . . and it wasn’t a single presence. They were supernatural troops, gray figures clad in bizarre armor. Obviously their bombardment had opened a hole into the subterranean system. On seeing the trio, they quickly raised their blowguns to their lips.

Black darts whizzed through the air, striking the soldiers right between the

eyes.

Shoving their way through supernatural soldiers who were tumbling back with half their faces gone, fresh opponents brought long, thin tubes to bear on the warriors.

A heartbeat later, all of those soldiers dropped with faces shattered like pomegranates. Though the last of them managed to get off a shot, the blow dart sailed right over the trio's heads.

With the ability to drop a dozen opponents in less than a second, Stanza was truly formidable.

Now that the wave of attackers had broken, the trio began walking again. They'd gone three paces when a new opponent appeared behind them. Stanza turned, and her right hand flashed into action. Her darts flew at speeds in excess of Mach 1, but each of them was deflected with a beautiful *ting!* The oblong iron plates the soldiers in the fore had raised had served as shields against the darts. From between those shields, dozens of blow darts flew. The silent barrage of needles was met by a swipe from a lone blade. Shortly after, the shields and the soldiers behind them toppled one after another.

Shots rang out. Stanza and Strider reeled simultaneously, clutching their chest and shoulder, respectively. Ordinarily they'd have sensed the shots a split second before they were fired and moved out of the way, but at present their brains and nerves were under the control of another.

Cries were then heard. But they didn't come from the two warriors. Something had happened on the other side of the hole. There were alternating gunshots and flashes of light, but it soon grew quiet.

The figure that stood there with a lowered blade was as beautiful as anything from a dream. The soldiers he'd destroyed had left only bits of something like ash. Callously trampling through it, D quickly approached the trio.

As the pair of warriors stared at him in a daze, sense returned to their faces as the pain of the shoulder and chest wounds broke the strange spell that'd bound them.

"Get going," D said, tossing his chin in the direction of the hole.

“How on earth did you—?”

Strider had begun to ask how the Hunter had escaped being buried alive, but then he stopped. For a man that gorgeous, nothing seemed impossible.

“You’re something else,” Stanza said, her words sinking.

D caught her falling body with his left hand and effortlessly threw it over his shoulder. Then he pressed his right index finger into the neck of the still-advancing Irene, rendering her unconscious. He piled her on top of Stanza, as if he were building a sandwich.

D started off after Strider, who was still clutching his shoulder, then halted and turned toward the energy torrent. It almost looked like someone had called out at him to stop.

“It’s no use. Even if I were to join you, you’d still have no choice but to meet your end,” the Hunter said in a low voice, no doubt in answer to something.

The shadowy figures beckoned to him. *Come*, they shouted.

“You’ll see soon enough,” D said, once again seeming to answer an unheard question, and then he turned around.

Standing right by the entrance to the hole, Strider asked him, “What the hell was that all about?” A sanguine flower had bloomed from his right shoulder down to his waist.

As they headed back the way D had come, the Hunter told him, “A blow dart that missed you three struck the malevolent torrent. That was enough to upset it.”

“What do you mean by *upset it*?”

“Its energy is getting out of control. There’s no saying what’ll happen.”

When the two men arrived at the surface, a dull concussion reached them from the bowels of the earth. Having lost its singular purpose, the once-systematic flow of energy had begun running amuck.

Although the place where the group came out was about a thousand yards

from the emergency bunker they'd originally entered, the bombardment had left the ground brutally cratered.

D whistled. Though he hadn't been particularly loud, he didn't have long to wait before the ring of iron-shod hooves could be heard approaching from the direction of the bunker. It was his cyborg horse.

"Damn, it's a shame about that jeep," Strider muttered with a pale face.

Instead of replying to him, D looked up at the sky.

From the direction of the highway, a number of airborne shapes were flying their way. There were about a dozen of them.

"They gonna bomb us again?"

"Stay right there," D told the warrior, setting down the two women and drawing his blade.

ON THE ROAD TO DEATH

CHAPTER 5

I

The forms dotting the heavens quickly became supernatural soldiers with cylindrical flight packs strapped to their backs. The devices may have operated on magnetism, since the scenery directly below them was distorted as if by a heat shimmer.

Here, too, the gap between their civilization and that of their former masters—the Nobility—was made manifest. In either hand the soldiers carried gourd-shaped bombs with fins attached to them. No doubt they'd be aimed with the naked eye.

"Help me up . . . I'll drop the bastards!" panted a voice at D's feet. It was Stanza. The right side of her chest was stained vermilion.

"You'll just be in the way," D countered flatly.

"They're coming from the air. And I'm the only one with ranged weapons!"

"Can you even move your right arm?"

Not a word from the female warrior.

"Don't let her do anything stupid," D told Strider, and then he took off.

As the Hunter raced toward the fliers, leaving the other three behind, he asked, "Well?"

He seemed to pose the query to no one. But there was a reply.

"I'll manage something."

The hoarse voice made a sound as if taking several deep breaths. There was a faint *whooosh!* It sounded like flames springing to life.

Five of the fliers halted over D, and the remaining nine headed toward the other three members of his group. The supernatural soldiers took aim at the foe below. They started to release the bombs from both hands—and at that instant, the figure in black raised his left hand.

They saw his palm. Something was surfacing in it. Was that someone's face?

It was at that very moment that a violent gust shot up at them. With their flight packs destabilized, they spun around, turning end over end. Their flight packs collided, and before their bombs could fall, the soldiers were propelled away. There were no screams. All of them were sent careening to the west—the explosions occurred in a spot just two hundred yards away. Those who'd gone after the other three members of his group were part of the crash.

Dropping to one knee, D fended off the shock waves with the hem of his coat.

"How's that?" the hoarse voice inquired proudly.

"There are more on the way."

Other figures were gliding toward the Hunter from the direction of the highway. There were three of them. This time they were flying nap-of-the-earth, blasting away with their guns as they came.

A cloud of dust enveloped D. The soldiers saw him fall face down, and they kept going, right over D's head.

But the gorgeous fatality rose like a supernatural bird. His attack in midair was a smooth progression from flashing steel to bright blood. As D decapitated one soldier, he simultaneously landed on the man's back. Manipulating the flight pack, he brought the headless corpse around.

From a mere sixty feet away, the other two soldiers indiscriminately sprayed lead at him. D's body shook; the bullets were hitting the mark. However, D's left hand was continuously spitting dark objects at the ground. Lead slugs. The Hunter's wounds were healing, and even the holes the bullets left in the fabric were closing.

As D approached, the supernatural soldiers were powerless. His beauty captivated them. When he passed, bloody blossoms spread their petals in

midair, then immediately became a scarlet shower that rained down on the earth . . . along with the severed heads of the spellbound pair. Still held aloft by the flying devices on their backs, the decapitated cadavers flew off into the distance.

As they watched D skillfully manipulate the dead man's flight pack for a landing beside them, the two warriors looked as if they could see the very air itself. It was D. But even knowing this, the unearthly skill he'd just demonstrated was difficult to comprehend.

"What the hell are you, man?" Strider asked, his face strangely pale. "Are dhampirs really that incredible?"

Not replying, D put his finger against the neck of the prone Irene. Opening her eyes, she sat up, and the look on her face as she tried to get her bearings showed she was back to normal.

"Where am I? How did I get out here?"

On seeing the bloodied man and woman, the girl swallowed hard.

"We'll fill you in on all the details later," said Strider. "Hey, D, I'm gonna be okay, but the skirt here is in a bad way."

"Keep your snotty remarks to yourself!" the warrior woman shot back, but her complexion was bloodless, like paraffin. Unable to hold her torso up, she fell over.

"So, she's gonna slow us down?" Strider spat toxically.

"We'll leave her," said D.

Staring at his handsome features, Stanza nodded and said, "Good enough. I'll catch up with you later."

Suddenly, she coughed. The very action was devoid of strength. Blood spilled from her mouth.

"The lungs?" Strider groaned. "That ain't good at all. Unless someone does something, she's not gonna last twelve hours."

"Sounds like . . . you'd love that . . . to happen," Stanza said, her words creeping across the ground with her breath.

“Sure. One less hand means more loot to go around when we get back. I’ll take your share!”

As Strider grinned slyly, he noticed someone staring daggers at him. Turning to the glaring Irene, he asked, “What’s that look for?”

“You lousy animal!”

“Excuse me?” Strider replied, more stunned than angry. That was hardly the kind of thing he’d expect the self-centered girl to say.

“Give the fighting . . . a rest,” Stanza managed to say, almost sounding delirious. “Hurry up . . . and go . . . I’ll survive.”

“Hey—pull yourself together! You call yourself a warrior?”

There was no reply. Stanza had lost consciousness.

Irene looked up at D. Her expression was grave and troubled.

“You have to be able to do something. Help her!”

He didn’t respond.

“You just plan on leaving her here? She’s dying!”

“You got left behind, too.”

“You don’t have to remind me. And that’s exactly why I can’t just leave her here.”

“Are *you* going to look after her?”

Irene was tongue tied.

Never taking his eyes off the girl, D said, “You can go back if you like. What’s it going to be?”

Irene looked down at Stanza, then turned her gaze in the direction of the town. Lacking anything to focus on, her eyes revealed how torn she was.

“Okay,” she said as if the word were a curse, waving one hand in surrender. “I’m used to treating injured folks back at our house. But just so we’re clear on something, I’m not coming along because I wanna save her. I figure I’m safer sticking with the lot of you than going back to town alone.”

“Good enough,” D replied in a tone that suggested there was nothing good about it at all, and then he squatted beside Stanza. As she was face down, he rolled her onto her back and unfastened her armored chest piece. He then pulled up the shirt beneath it.

“What . . . are you . . . doing? Stop . . . it!” Stanza said, with nothing save a flimsy brassiere to secure her bloodstained and ample breasts.

“Hold it right there! I’ll handle this.”

Ignoring Irene’s flustered protests, D removed the undergarment. The woman’s bosoms spilled free. The bullet had entered at the base of Stanza’s left breast. The flesh had already closed around it.

Irene wore an expression that seemed to curse the Hunter as a pervert, but then her features stiffened when she looked at D’s profile.

The thumb and forefinger of his left hand probed the wound. Stanza twitched.

“This will hurt a bit. You can cry out if you want.”

Opening her eyelids a crack, she said, “You must be . . . joking.”

The girl and the warrior both watched as D’s fingers sank into the wound.

Stanza’s face twisted with the terrible pain. Actually, the agony shattered it. Her eyes, nose, and mouth were distended into inhuman shapes, and a series of spasms jolted through her body.

Irene simply stared at D’s pale visage. Her body wouldn’t move. It was as if someone far stronger was in her head, commanding her to train her eyes on D. To watch a man who could lay bare the chest of a writhing, bloodied woman and cruelly jam two fingers into a wound without raising an eyebrow . . .

He’s not human, she thought. *No, a man that cold and beautiful couldn’t be human. I’m witness to something here that’s not of this world. That’s why I don’t need to cover my ears or shut my eyes. Even the stench of the blood isn’t making me sick. That unearthly beauty trumps everything else in this world.*

Stanza stopped moving for a second, let out a little sigh, and then twisted her body again. D’s fingers had started to come back out. A startling amount of blood spilled from Stanza’s mouth, clinging to her chin and chest. Nevertheless,

she didn’t make a sound. Irene wondered if the agony had been so bad the woman had bitten her own tongue off.

D’s fingers slipped out of the wound. Between them, he held a huge lead slug. Naturally, it was covered with blood. Setting it down by his feet, D said, “You didn’t need to cry out, did you?”

Though his tone was still cold, Irene widened her eyes. She detected a certain emotion in his words. Something resembling praise.

Without another word, D put his left hand over Stanza’s mouth.

Shaking violently, Stanza was about to spit up more blood when the strength suddenly drained from her body. Was she dead? As if this were what she’d been waiting for, peace returned to her pain-wracked features. It was almost as if D’s left hand had poured some miracle drug into her.

The Hunter’s left hand was quickly pressed against the wound on her breast. In the span of two breaths it came away again, and Irene heard both herself and Strider gasp in astonishment. Though the woman was still covered with blood, no scar or any hint of the wound remained.

II

Evening came. Spotting a service area to the right of the highway, D turned his cyborg horse in that direction. Ordinarily, dhampirs operated better at night than by day. On his own, D might’ve charged ahead and covered more of the distance to the abandoned castle, but with the lowly humans along that wasn’t an option.

Up until now, he’d ignored their wishes. All of them were riding on a single steed: Irene sat in front of D, Strider behind him, and Stanza was over his shoulder. As they galloped along, Irene’s and Strider’s asses had taken the bumps right through the bare back of the beast, with the wounded Strider in particular letting out a constant stream of cries of pain and invectives.

“Come on! Patch my wound up, too,” he pleaded with D, but the Hunter didn’t

glance at him or even bother to tell the warrior to tough it out. The bleeding had been stanched by the first-aid kit the warrior always carried, but the bullet was still inside him. Though removing it himself wasn't out of the question, D hadn't given Strider time enough to do even that.

"Damn it, is this supposed to be some new kind of abuse or something?" the warrior grumbled, but his scornful gaze grew hazy and his mind was starting to slip by the time they reached the service area.

Actually, the service area was no more than a single building—a farmhouse that'd been converted into a combined cafeteria and lodgings, as the proprietor's main occupation was farming. In a manner of speaking, it was a flophouse.

As expected, the interior had been laid waste. According to Irene, it was run by a family of seven, but not one of them was anywhere to be seen. As proof that they hadn't fled, their wagon remained out back.

"I wonder what could've happened to them all?" Irene said.

No one answered her.

D set Stanza down on a sofa in the living room. Then he went to check out the rest of the house.

"A brat and two gimps—those are some real special traveling companions," the hoarse voice jeered.

"Never mind them," the Hunter replied. "What happened to that torrent of malice?"

"Oh, that? I thought it was gonna blow sky high, but it seems to have calmed down. That energy is a collection of hate, but it also has a will. I'm sure it despises all of you and the supernatural soldiers, too."

"It's biding its time, then?"

"Probably—it'll wait for the perfect opportunity to kill us all. That thing's trouble. It's flowing around beneath our feet. It's ever present. It'd be safe to say it's wise to everything we do."

"Industrious, isn't it?"

“You can say that again,” the hoarse voice said, laughing haughtily.

After checking the house from attic to basement, D went outside. There was a barn out back. A deep blue tinged the air. To all appearances, it was the epitome of a peaceful evening.

D suddenly halted.

A sandbox had been set up in one corner of the yard, and in it lay a plastic pail and shovel. Nearby sat a child’s tricycle.

“Guess they’re gone now,” the hoarse voice said. “And they’re never gonna get to play in that sandbox again.”

Saying nothing, D turned to face the barn. It had big wooden doors that opened out from the middle, and they now stood open about a foot.

Right in front of the doors, the hoarse voice said, “Hmm.”

Opening the left side, D slipped inside.

After he’d gone three paces, a voice told him, “Okay, freeze!” It’d called down to him from the barn’s loft. A long ladder stretched up from the ground. Beside it stood a tall man, his old-fashioned repeating rifle trained on the Hunter.

“Zack Morrowbak?” D asked.

The man’s expression changed. “You’re a bounty hunter, ain’t you? Well, I’m gonna kill you dead, fucker!”

Flames of murderous lust clung to every inch of the man.

“Don’t do it, Zack,” called out a voice at ground level—from the far end of the barn. Beside the wagon, a bearded man stepped out with a crossbow leveled. He was around forty, older than Morrowbak.

“Yuri Tataika,” D said.

“My, it’s an honor having a looker like you say my name. Now, Zack, don’t you go looking at his face, you hear?”

“I hear that,” the other man responded in a rough voice, but it was already too late—his words carried a ring of intoxication.

“There’s one more of you, isn’t there?” D said, his eyes peering past the wagon

where Yuri was standing.

“No, make that *two*.”

With that, a middle-aged man appeared from behind the wagon, a longsword on his hip. In his hand he held a knife. The tip of it was pressed against Irene’s pale cheek, drawing a trickle of red.

“Seems the little lady here was looking for something, D,” the third man said to the Hunter.

Though this was the same person who’d brutally cut down men and women back at the bank, oddly enough there wasn’t an iota of killing lust about him. Even his tone was that of an ordinary man.

“My name is Zenon. I may not be as famous as you, but some folks have heard of me.”

“You were a Hunter of Nobility,” D said in a voice like moonlight. Undoubtedly his sighs would be like the dust the Sandman scattered. “But now you’re known as a bank robber.”

A terrible sadness colored Zenon’s face. “We can discuss that later. There’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“We’ve nothing to discuss,” D said firmly. “Let the girl go.”

“How about joining forces with me?” asked Zenon. His tone was sincere. “As things stand, we’re pinned down. But if we had you along, it’d be a great help.”

“Because you think a dhampir is bound to know about the mercenaries the Nobles made?”

“That’s right,” Zenon said, nodding bashfully.

“More than me, it’s the girl you need. She knows shortcuts and things like that.”

“In that case, you’ll need her too. Let’s work together.”

“What are you asking him like that for, Zenon? I’ll blow one of his arms off, and then he’ll listen to whatever you have to say!” Zack shouted from the loft.

He was clearly mentally unstable. Quick tempered, wild, and impatient, he’d

lived the kind of life those things embodied, and ultimately it was that which had brought him into contact with D.

“Simmer down, Zack.”

It wasn’t Zenon that cautioned the rifleman, but rather the man beside him—Yuri Tataika. While not as composed as Zenon, he still remained level headed.

“How in blazes are we supposed to keep cool at a time like this? We’ve got freaking monsters in front of us and behind us! There’s no way in hell of telling when they’ll attack. Now our ace in the hole, Zenon, isn’t worth shit. And to top it all off, we’ve got a party after us.”

“They’re in the same boat we are. Can’t you see that’s why Zenon’s saying we should join forces for the time being?”

“Shut your pie hole! What are you gonna do if they stab us in the back while we’re shaking their hands? Hell, I’ve see the kind of shit bounty hunters pull!”

The finger he had wrapped around the trigger was pulled back as far as it could go.

“Zack!”

The man being addressed simply went ahead and took things to the next level. Screaming like a lunatic, he pulled the trigger—but never finished. As he was shouting, Yuri had fired his crossbow at Zack. Bursting through the floor without losing any of its force, the arrow pierced Zack through the heart and came out his back. Even after the arrow had gone through him, the man’s impetus carried him forward. Like a marathon runner breasting the tape across the finish line, he sailed down to the ground. By the time he landed, he’d already breathed his last.

Letting out a sigh, Zenon said, “Now, I’m not asking you to trust us just because of that, but you’ve got to know we’re talking straight with you.”

“Let the girl go.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Zenon pulled the knife away. Irene ran from him, circling around behind D.

“I went looking for some medicine for Stanza. And then . . .”

“Go back to the others.”

Glaring at D as if he were a cold-hearted beast, the girl began to back away.

After hearing her walk out the door, D asked, “So, what’s this talk of joining forces?”

Relief skimmed across Zenon’s face.

“You’re probably here to bring us in, but we know full well the death penalty’s waiting for us. Sorry, but we’re not going back. All we can do is run. Up ahead, though, the whole area is crawling with monsters. To be honest, we couldn’t cut our way through them on our own. And then along comes you. As soon as I saw your face, I thought to myself, God must really like me. What do you say to going to the ruins with us? The freaking mercenaries won’t go into their boss’s castle unless they’re summoned. Then all we have to do is wait until help arrives from the Capital. See, that’s where me and mine will just disappear in the confusion.”

“You’d only be in the way.”

“What?”

“Two of my companions are already injured. I have no intention of picking up any more baggage.”

“Well, we’re capable of taking care of ourselves.”

“Then just go. After you leave the bank’s money, that is.”

Zenon’s expression became that of a completely different person.

“The job I took was to rescue anyone who might’ve taken shelter in the ruins. Since the supernatural soldiers have returned, their master probably lives again, too. As far as you folks are concerned, I was asked to take you down if possible and get the money back. There’s no need for us to fight.”

Zenon closed his eyes.

The hoarse voice was heard to say, “Oh, what have we here?”

His eyes still shut, Zenon said, “Well, I beg to differ.”

“Zenon?”

D dashed forward, the wind swirling in his wake. Light limned an iridescent arc. From the very start, D hadn’t needed these outlaws. His blade zipped toward the

top of Zenon's head. Impossibly, the sword was parried! When did the outlaw draw? And when did he position his sword?

Biting into the blade Zenon held up over his head, D's sword wouldn't move. Zenon grinned. D's eyes gleamed. Not only were the two blades locked in combat, but the minds of the men were as well.

D pushed. Zenon pushed back. As they vied for supremacy, their power reached its zenith. Just then, D's sword broke. The parrying sword became a blade of death, making a diagonal slash at D.

D leapt back. The tip of Zenon's blade missed him by a hair—or so it appeared, but was that a trick of the light? In defiance of the laws of physics, the steely flash stretched . . . toward D's shoulder. The fresh blood that gushed out was no illusion.

On landing, D saw something: the caped Zenon leaping above his head. How would D parry that?

III

A harsh sound ripped through the twilight. Reversing his blade, Zenon shot a glance at what he'd just batted down, then immediately looked at his side. An iron arrow was stuck in the ground by his feet, next to Yuri—the one who'd fired it.

"You trying to screw with me?" Zenon asked, and his voice had a ring of intoxication to it.

"No!" Yuri exclaimed in fear-fraught denial. "That's not what I wanted to do. I was just following your orders."

"*My* orders?"

"Yeah, though it looks like you might not remember them."

"Yes, you're right." Zenon's body suddenly grew uneasy. "I don't remember."

His sword limned an arc larger than itself as he swung it up toward the loft.

There was a low groan, and the sound of flesh and bone being rent. Bisected at the waist, a figure fell to the ground with a bloody spray.

“Be careful—he came from above!” Yuri said, the steel string of his crossbow snapping into action. All five of the figures who’d smashed through the windows in the loft and were charging forward were then sent flying. They looked like skewered dolls.

The roof shattered. More figures rained down, along with pieces of solar panels. A number of the soldiers were sliced in two in midair by gleaming arcs, while others split in half the instant they reached the ground.

D had already leapt from the barn. As he cut across the yard, he grabbed a mattock from the ground and snapped off its iron head. He was left with a pole a little over two feet long.

Figures in gray flew down from the roof of the main house. They held pipes in their mouths.

Without seeming to move at all, D dodged the darts that flew silently at him. He thrust the pole straight out. The instant he caved one figure’s face in, he then swung his weapon around to catch five more. The force of the blows was like the impact of a sledgehammer. The figures in gray were brutally ripped apart.

Untouched by the swirling vermilion fog, D entered the main house. From his left, his right, and up ahead blow darts flew at him. The silent weapons were batted down by a single swing of D’s pole. Not giving them time for a second volley, he leapt, swinging the pole as he landed. The three supernatural soldiers were helpless as he smashed in their skulls or pierced their throats. D knew no mercy.

The Hunter bounded into the living room.

“D?” Strider said, turning where he stood in front of the sofa with a naked blade in one hand. Not only was his chest covered with blood, but his face as well. Seeing the Hunter, he planted the end of his longsword in the floor and leaned on it. A sigh of relief escaped him.

“What about the other two?” D asked.

“Stanza’s back behind the sofa. I haven’t the faintest clue about the girl. I

heard voices out back, but that was all.”

“You screwed up,” the hoarse voice said. D shouldn’t have let her leave the barn.

“Time to clear out.”

Pushing the sofa over, D pressed the palm of his left hand against the nape of Stanza’s neck. A violent shudder went through her for a second, and then Stanza opened her eyes.

“D?”

“We’re surrounded. We’ll make a break for it.”

“Okay.”

Clinging to the sofa, Stanza pulled herself up. D didn’t offer to help her, and Stanza made no request for his aid. He didn’t even ask her if she could stand.

Footsteps could be heard approaching from the back door. Strider braced himself for action.

Zenon appeared, saying, “I took care of the barn and the backyard.”

He was back to his normal self.

“Whatever was possessing him has passed,” the hoarse voice said sarcastically.

“This is Strider and Stanza. They’re with me. They’re warriors,” D said by way of introduction. “As for these two—well, you know who they are, don’t you?”

“He’s Yuri Tataika, isn’t he?” Stanza said frostily.

“And the other one—yeah, I remember seeing a wanted poster for him. Zenon something or other, right?” Strider said, his voice tinged with tension and delight. His probing look became one of suspicion.

“Zack Morrowbak was killed by his friends,” said D. Ignoring the ever more suspicious looks from Strider, D told Zenon, “I have no intention of joining up with you. If you choose to follow us, that’s your business.”

The two outlaws nodded. The situation D described would leave them free to stick a knife in his back, but they knew he wasn’t the sort of young man to worry about something like that.

“Go upstairs and see what’s going on outside,” Zenon ordered Yuri.

Without a word of complaint, the crossbowman headed for the stairs.

“Now that they know we’re not pushovers, they’ll probably get to work on a plan, so we don’t have time to just hang around doing nothing. Let’s hit the road real quick. Right now, they’ll still be scattered.”

“Without any horses?” Stanza protested.

“Hell, we’ll take the family’s ride,” said Strider. “You know, the longer we flap our gums about this, the more time they’ll have to tighten their defenses!”

“Their wagon has an engine,” Zenon said. “We can put boards all around the sides to keep out the blow darts. It’ll be crude, but it might be worth a try.”

“Forget it.”

They all turned in the direction from which the voice had come. Yuri was coming down from the second floor. His body was shrouded in a white fog . . . smoke. White smoke was pouring from Yuri’s body.

“They took to the freaking air. I opened the window, and out of the blue . . .”

They could all see the blow dart stuck in Yuri.

“Damn, I’m hot! It’s gonna burn me right down to the bone. They’ve got you surrounded. You guys . . . better . . . watch it . . .”

A second later, flames enveloped Yuri from head to toe and he fell to the floor. On striking it, he crumbled into fine ash.

“Poison darts?” Strider groaned.

“You mean to tell me that from the very beginning . . . ?” Stanza said, her voice tainted with fright.

They’d been lucky.

There were faint raps against the wall. It was as if hail or something like it had begun to fall. Except the roof was silent—it wasn’t falling from the sky.

“Blow darts,” Zenon said, looking all around. White smoke was beginning to billow from the wall.

“Seems like they work on more than just living things. I don’t know if even a boarded-up wagon would do much good.”

“What’ll we do, D?”

Their eyes all focused on the young man in black. He had kept his own eyes shut. And then he looked up.

“You got a plan?” Strider asked, leaning closer.

“I’ll tell you something,” D said. His response startled them, because the words had been delivered by a hoarse voice. “God will deliver us.”

“What?”

“Our salvation is in heaven above, friends.”

They all looked up. Less than ten seconds later their eyes were back down and glaring at D, but another three seconds after that, the roof ripped open and something dropped from the raised ceiling. It was a brass communication capsule.

At this point, everyone but D first noticed the sound of an engine in the sky above.

Moving swiftly, D pulled the communication capsule from where it’d lodged in the wall by the stairs. At one end it tapered for eight inches like the tip of a harpoon. Twisting the other end opened it. Inside was a single piece of paper. As D opened it, three other pairs of eyes were trained on its surface. All of them had run over to him.

The contents were simple. Scrawled on it were the words, *Leave it to me!* The note wasn’t even signed.

Stanza coughed. Strider followed suit. The poison that was melting away the walls also had a gas component.

The ground shook. Part of the wall and ceiling caved in. It was immediately apparent what was happening. At least three of them had recently had a similar experience.

“Bombs!”

D could feel the incredible turbulence being generated outside. Those he'd sensed surrounding the house now scattered in shock.

"Here we go!" the Hunter called out, heading for the fallen wall. This was their nearest means of egress. He didn't so much as spare a glance at the pair of warriors writhing in pain. The young man didn't feel even a trace of fellowship with them. But then, that was understandable. They weren't as gorgeous as D.

D never stopped until he was out of the house. Mortar-shaped craters had been left across the site and on the highway. Darkness held sway. There wasn't a supernatural soldier to be seen anywhere.

Sparks shot up on the far side of the road. After they lent a reddish tinge to D's face, there was a roar. Footsteps halted behind him, followed by a succession of coughs. Apparently everyone had managed to escape.

"Seems they're on our side," Zenon said to the Hunter.

D nodded. "There's only the sound of one engine. Can't be the military or a private defense unit."

"Well, we'll see soon enough."

Just as Zenon spoke, there was the hum of an engine, and an object that called to mind a thick slice of ham came flying from the direction of the explosions. It was about six and a half feet in diameter and ringed by a metal handrail. It landed on the road five yards from D and the others. Judging from the way it kicked up dust and pebbles, it apparently had an engine and fan at its base.

The craft was now facing them. The figure atop it dropped the yoke-style controls and extended a set of stairs off the right side before stepping down to the ground. With what appeared to be a heavy machine gun under one arm, he came toward them. Something like a long ribbon hung from the bottom of the gun and trailed across the ground. It was an ammo belt for the machine gun.

"How's tricks, everyone?" the man who halted before the group asked in an unguarded manner, but D alone recognized him. It was Beatrice, known for his husky voice, wild beard, and gigantic stature.

THE WAY TO THE VAMPIRE CASTLE

CHAPTER 6

I

About a thousand yards ahead, the highway ran into the forest. After loading Stanza and Strider onto Beatrice's "flying platform" and telling them to go on ahead, D entered the forest on foot with the outlaw. The horses Zenon and his men had stashed near the service area had been taken by the besieging forces.

They soon found a place to make camp. It was a bungalow meant to keep travelers safe through the night. Constructed of reinforced plastic, the domed building could accommodate more than twenty people, and it was equipped with baths, restrooms, medicine, food, and weapons.

Arriving at the bungalow a short time after the flying platform, D went straight into the storeroom, grabbed a longsword, and came out again. As this bungalow had been set up with Nobles and other nocturnal monstrosities in mind, there were no cheap knockoffs inside. Though the sword D chose had been mass produced, it was good enough to allow a novice to penetrate a fire dragon's armor. And while it was a simple weapon, in D's hands it would become the match of any of the famous swords of old.

"Get some rest," D told Strider and Stanza, and then, putting the longsword over his shoulder, he headed for the doorway.

Just then, Beatrice stepped through the door. He'd probably been making adjustments to his flying platform. He was the one who'd spotted the bungalow from the air.

"Hey, mister," Stanza called out to him.

"Yeah?" Beatrice responded, turning around. His hirsute face wore a lewd grin. His eyes were riveted to the lovely woman's impressive chest.

Ignoring this, Stanza continued, “A long time ago, I saw someone who looked like you. Back in my hometown in the western Frontier—there was this Hunter who took down five Nobles in Sierra de Cobre Castle all by himself. Ever since the day he came back to the village covered in blood, they’ve lived in peace. He was incredible. Was that . . .”

“Yeah, that was me. All me,” Beatrice said, pointing a thumb at himself, his eyes gleaming.

Seeing that he could barely keep from drooling, Stanza heaved a sigh. “Guess I was mistaken.”

“Don’t be silly. I remember you, too. You know, you haven’t changed a bit. Yeah, that really takes me back.”

“That was twenty years ago. I was four.”

“Huh?” the man exclaimed, for D had grabbed his shoulder.

“I need you to stick with me for a while longer.”

At D’s words, Beatrice looked puzzled, but he quickly recovered, asking, “You want me to follow you and do a bombing run? That thing’s a clunker I pulled out of Bossage’s armory. The engine could crap out at any minute. I’ve only got a little more than twenty bombs left, and less than ten thousand rounds for the heavy machine gun. We shouldn’t use it unless we really need to.”

“Take me to the soldiers’ nearest encampment. I’ll get off nearby.”

“What for?”

“They captured a girl.”

A look of surprise was on Beatrice’s face as he stared at the handsome visage, but his cheeks quickly flushed and he diverted his gaze.

“You really don’t seem like the type to give a damn about that. So, how much is this ride worth to you?” the giant said, adding, “Come on, don’t look at me that way! When you ask for something, you’ve gotta expect to pay a price. That’s the way the world works.”

“I won’t have any complaint about you coming with us.”

“Hey, now!” Beatrice snapped, but then he got himself under control. No matter how you looked at it, there was no one you’d rather have owing you a favor than D.

“Deal. I’ll go fire up the engine.”

As the massive form returned to the darkness, D looked over his shoulder and asked, “Zenon, you coming?”

The figure leaning against the wall at one end of the room straightened up and said, “Yeah, I believe I will.”

Even before he spoke, Stanza called out, “So what are we, baggage?”

Of course, it was Strider that replied, “Drop it, Stanza. Our pretty little dhampir didn’t ask for us lowly humans. Besides, busting our humps for that spoiled little bitch isn’t worth the reward.”

Still gazing at D, Stanza lay down on the sofa and said, “You’ve got a point there. Well, I guess we’ll just take it easy, then.”

Twenty minutes later, the flying platform went straight up, maintaining an altitude of a hundred and fifty feet as it flew north.

“She sure laid into you,” Zenon said to Beatrice as the wry-looking giant rubbed his right cheek.

“Put a cork in it.”

“It’s all well and good to try and pick up a lady, but you should consider choosing your target a little more carefully.”

“Shut the hell up. One more peep out of you and I’m throwing you over the side!”

Beatrice’s cheek bore the discolored remnants of a slap. It was unclear quite what he was thinking when he’d followed Stanza to the bathroom and tried to make a pass at her, earning himself one of her best shots. Stanza had indignantly recounted the incident, earning Beatrice laughter and scornful looks from the rest of the group.

“It doesn’t make a sound,” D remarked.

“No. The muffler seems to be the only thing in perfect shape. Runs pretty well for a thirty-year-old piece of secondhand equipment. It was probably built for espionage.”

“Does it have a bombing system?”

“Unfortunately, that’s done manually. Just sight your target and chuck a bomb,” Beatrice said, tossing his chin at the iron box secured to the floor on his right. To his left, the heavy machine gun sat on its mount. Below it was a tin box full of ammo.

Eyeing both armaments, Zenon said, “I see you’ve got hand grenades, too.”

“That’s what they look like, but they’re bombs. The gunpowder charge isn’t the same. Stay within the kind of range you use with grenades, and you’ll blow yourself to hell too. Which reminds me, D,” he said to the Hunter, “you got some particular reason for asking only this guy along?”

Beatrice wasn’t a pilot, after all, but rather a warrior.

Still facing straight ahead, D replied, “Because he’s not alone.”

“Come again?”

“Allow me to explain,” Zenon said, positioning himself in the pair’s field of view. “Inside me, there’s more than one of me. The doctors say I have multiple personality disorder. Most of the time, *I’m* out in the world, but sometimes the *other* me takes my place. And that other me is a swordsman who’s every bit as good as the great D.”

“Come on, now!” Beatrice protested.

Looking at D, Zenon tilted his head to one side.

“He’s right,” the Hunter said.

Suddenly, their craft pitched to the right. It came as no surprise that none of them cried out, but the way they clung to the handrail was almost comical.

The flying platform quickly returned to normal, and Beatrice cursed, “Son of a bitch! Don’t startle me like that! You made me put a little too much power into

my hand. What are we supposed to do if we crash?”

This remark left the other two dumbstruck.

After gripping the controls in silence for a while, Beatrice turned to Zenon and said, “You know, for someone with something inside him that can top D, you seem pretty normal.”

“I am, when *I’m* in control,” Zenon replied. “But he’s stronger than I am. He can push right by me if he wants. And when he does, there’s not a damned thing I can do about it.”

“So, do you remember what happens while he’s in charge?”

“If I did, I might not feel so bad.”

“You don’t say,” Beatrice remarked, a gleam of curiosity filling his eyes. He loved gossip.

“That fucker’s a homicidal maniac. He’s the cruelest, most evil creature I know of. They say people are born a blank canvas, and they can take whatever colors they like, but that’s bullshit. He’s rotten to the core, a kind of pure evil that shouldn’t exist in this world.”

Exasperated, Zenon struck his fist against his chest, continuing, “Right here. That’s where he is. I know how he works. He’s cut the head off a little kid who was walking by, for no reason at all. He’s busted in on some family he didn’t even know and murdered them all. When he’s out of money he knocks over a bank, and if he’s feeling horny he takes a woman. And on top of it all, he must be . . .”

Zenon’s voice rapidly dwindled. His free hand gripped the handrail, and his head hung low.

“Sorry, it’s just that sometimes . . .”

“Don’t sweat it,” Beatrice reassured him, without conviction. “Everybody’s got a thing or two bugging ’em. I suppose your troubles are just a little too big. Now, this might be a dumb question, but if it bothers you so much, why haven’t you just ended it all?” A second later, the bearded warrior gasped and said, “We’re there.”

Beneath them, countless lights flickered. Judging from the size of the area they

covered, this was clearly an army encampment.

“I’ll set you down as close as I can,” Beatrice said, pushing the yoke forward.

The wind generated by the craft’s descent battered D’s face. But his ears caught a sound.

“You asked why I hadn’t chosen to die?”

The voice was Zenon’s. However, it wasn’t the Zenon he knew.

“I’ll tell you why. Because no place could possibly be more fun than this world!”

At the outlaw’s hip, a blade raced from its sheath with a gleam that was blinding in the darkness of the night. D drew, as well. Both swords caught the moonlight.

“Hey, remember where we are!” Beatrice reprimanded them. “Save it till you get off. You wanna die in a crash or something?”

“You stood up to one of my blows—and you don’t even have a scar from it. I’ve been waiting for a man like you.”

The corners of Zenon’s lips rose in a smile. Not a word of what Beatrice said had gotten through to him.

“I’m overjoyed, D! Now we’ll finish this.”

Naturally, D wasn’t someone to back down, either. Shifting his freshly drawn sword in front of his chest, he held it perfectly horizontal.

Zenon grinned, saying, “I broke your sword. So now you’ll try to break mine?”

The outlaw held his sword pointed directly at the Hunter, and then gradually brought it over to the right and raised it high—he wasn’t about to decline D’s invitation.

The flying platform continued to sink, with the howling wind reigning over the craft. Amidst that whistling, a low, strong voice said, “You’re not alive, are you?”

A second later, the sword was swung down from its high position without a single word. Locking together with the horizontal blade rising from below, it sent harsh sparks shooting into the darkness.

A powerful impact sent the three men and their vehicle flying to the right. Only Beatrice, clinging to the controls, remained on board. Not making a sound, the other two figures sailed through the darkness and out of sight. The outcome of their deadly encounter was unknown.

II

Irene awoke in darkness. It was on account of this that she had to wonder at first if she was dreaming. Up until now she'd never experienced complete and utter darkness, devoid of even a speck of light. So long as one was in the human world, there was always some light, even under the harshest natural conditions. Or something like light, to be more accurate. Maybe it was the spirit of humans and beasts that lived in the dark, or perhaps it was hope.

But now Irene couldn't see anything. Nor was there a breeze. In other words, she was in a completely enclosed space. All she could tell was that the floor was made of stone.

Anxiety had an iron grip on Irene's chest. As a girl who lived on the Frontier, she had a good deal of nerve, but she was powerless against memories carved into her DNA—the fear of being in the pitch blackness, with none of your own kind, abducted by something that wasn't human. Knowing that it was your turn next.

The hairs on my arms are standing on end, Irene thought. *I'm scared. But now that I recognize that, isn't there some way I can master my fear?*

She quickly recalled what'd happened at the farmhouse. She'd left the barn and was running back to the main house when she felt a sharp pain in the nape of her neck. Unfortunately, everything after that had faded into black.

It finally occurred to her to wonder whether anything had been done to her, but after some checking she discovered nothing out of the ordinary. Not only was her body unharmed, but even her clothes were just as they'd been. And both her hands and her feet were unfettered.

As her hands felt along her body, they touched something hard by her right

hip. It felt like wood and iron—a pistol. The enemy hadn't taken away the weapon she'd been given back at the subterranean bunker.

A boundless relief spread through every inch of the girl. Wrapping her hand around the wooden grip, she pulled the gun out of her belt and felt the serious weight of the iron.

"Well, this should be good for something," Irene murmured.

"I wonder about that," said an antiquated, masculine voice right in front of her. It couldn't have been more than a foot away.

Pure terror froze the girl as she realized there was someone standing in front of her. She had no idea how long the man had been there. Though she couldn't hear him breathing or sense
his presence, he was right there, and he probably wasn't friendly. She knew this the second she heard the voice. It'd sounded
cruel, scornful, overbearing, and more than anything else, famished.

“Who—who are you?” she asked, backing away a step and pointing the revolver in her left hand straight ahead of her. The thumb of her right hand cocked the hammer. Though she realized all she had to do to fire it was to pull the trigger, by cocking the hammer she decreased the distance she’d need to squeeze, and that would help keep her on target.

As expected, there was no reply.

“Who’s there? If you don’t answer, I’ll shoot!”

One shot, she thought. *There’s no way he’s on my side. So there’s no harm in*

trying to hit him. Even if I miss, the flash from the gun will tell me something about where I am.

Irene pulled the trigger. She'd fired similar handguns several times in the past. It was pretty much a requirement for living on the Frontier. However, this one had a particularly nasty kick. The rounds were different. Both her arms flew up over her head as if she were surrendering, and her left hand came free of the gun.

There was no one in front of her. Only the muzzle flash was as Irene had expected. For an instant, it'd illuminated the stone floor and the darkness surrounding her. There was nothing there. In a space that seemed to go on forever, there was only Irene and the source of the voice she'd just heard.

"Where the hell are you?" she turned and cried. At least she knew he wasn't in front of her. "Where are you? Where?"

Irene turned in a circle. She no longer knew which way she was facing.

"So nice of you to come," the voice said. It was right in front of her.

Irene didn't hesitate. The gun's kick sent her back a step. Though she indeed saw a color that wasn't that of the darkness in the spot where the voice was coming from, it was quickly lacquered over with pitch blackness.

"I have a fondness for strong women," the voice said. It came from right in front of her.

Before the girl could fire a third shot, something cold and soft pressed against her forehead.

Don't tell me that was a kiss! she thought.

The girl tried to simultaneously leap away and get off a shot. But she couldn't move. All sensation was leaving her body. She still had all her limbs, yet she couldn't so much as blink an eye.

"The strong ones have the hottest blood," said the voice.

Irene tried to scream.

"This is my bedroom. I suppose it's a bit too spacious for a human being. But it's simply perfect for playing hide-and-seek!"

Their lips overlapped.

Irene strained her eyes, but she couldn't see anything.

And the third kiss—that one, of course, came on the nape of her neck.

"I think we took some antiaircraft fire. That's what we should expect from an army," the hoarse voice remarked with amusement. "You know our location?"

All D did was nod.

The presumed enemy encampment was roughly a thousand yards to the south-southwest. The flying platform really hadn't been far off the mark. Fortunately, they'd been at an altitude of only about sixty feet when they fell, and D hadn't suffered a single scrape or broken bone. That's where a dhampir's body differed from a human's. Especially now that it was night—his time.

"I wonder what's happened to the others?"

Disregarding the musing of the hoarse voice, D started walking. He wouldn't intervene in the lives or deaths of other people, just as he wouldn't celebrate or mourn them.

"By the way," the hoarse voice continued, "that blow you blocked before we got blasted—what happened there?"

As expected, there was no reply, and D's sword remained in its sheath.

"Looks to me like those lousy mercenaries don't really come into their own until after it gets dark. Be real careful now." Dripping with sarcasm, the voice suddenly grew grave. "Try as I might, I just can't figure out why these clowns would come back to life now. Or why they'd be armed just like in the old days, for that matter."

While the Nobility possessed a kind of superscience some would describe as magic, they simply couldn't escape their predilection for nostalgia. Though some had the power to turn themselves into wind and fly through the air, and despite the fact that they'd developed a special field that allowed transport nearly at the speed of light, most of them preferred to travel down gaslit roads of cobblestone in old-fashioned horse-drawn carriages. It was also for this reason that their

homes were, without a single exception, reproductions of the castles of medieval Europe.

The battle that'd taken place on this highway had likewise eschewed such superadvanced developments as antiproton cannons, dimensional vortices, and fleets of tapered rockets in favor of swords, spears, and the occasional firearm—but those alone were enough to deliver vivid scenes of horror. It was said gigantic steam-driven robots, flying machines, and air cars had also been brought into the conflict.

"Maybe it's just that the Nobility love battle itself."

"You think they did this on purpose?" D said in a rare departure from character. "So they could see soldiers battling each other?"

"Could be. You'd know best. After all, half of the blood running through your veins is like theirs."

For a moment, there was a slight welling of tension in the vicinity of the Hunter's left hand, but this time D did nothing and merely kept walking. Needless to say, he was in the middle of the forest. The heavy grass absorbed the sound of his steps, but then D never had a problem walking silently, which left only the risk of losing his footing.

After the Hunter had gone about two hundred yards, there was an echo of intense gunfire up ahead.

"Oh, that'd be ol' Beatrice, I guess," said the hoarse voice. "Just had to jump in. Don't let it bother you. While he's got the enemy's attention, it gives you the perfect opportunity!"

Of course, D didn't seem at all worried about the man as he pressed forward.

The next thing the warrior knew, he was surrounded. He could sense them. Frantically pulling out a portable spray can, he sprayed himself from head to toe. Releasing the safety on the heavy machine gun, he then slid back the bolt.

The moment he was ready to fire, tiny things assailed him from all sides—blow darts. They all pierced Beatrice, and then dropped off him with dumbfounding

ease. While it allowed air to pass, the transparent membrane the spray had created around him could deflect even bullets. However, a single application would last only thirty minutes.

“Take that! I’ll show you lousy mercs not to screw with a professional warrior.”

The giant had wanted to move on before they spotted him, but since it looked like the flying platform might still be pressed into action, he’d gotten it into his head to repair the machine. The force of an artillery shell had warped one of the stabilizing fins. He’d been in the middle of welding the fin when he’d sensed someone coming.

First, Beatrice used the machine gun to sweep the surrounding area. He was a warrior, after all. Though he could see well in the dark, the enemy was concealed in high grass. Smoking them out was the first order of business.

Screams rang out, and figures writhed. From that initial burst of machine-gun fire, he learned that his opponents were forty-five to fifty feet away. However, they were also on all sides of him. If they all were to rush him at the same time, a lone machine gun wouldn’t keep them at bay.

“Don’t come any closer, damn you!” Beatrice called out, using his left hand to squeeze off a short burst of fire as he bent over and reached with his right for the iron container by his feet.

“Well, what do you know!”

The bombs remained in their neat rows.

“I bet these will make more of an impression,” Beatrice said, his meaty hand wrapping around a grenade. “Here ya go!” he exclaimed, tossing it over his shoulder.

There was a series of explosions that sent grass, dirt, and bodies flying.

“That covers my back. But this is hopeless. I sure as hell don’t fancy dying in a place like this,” he grumbled, continuing to lay down fire the whole time, hot brass casings sailing into the air.

The flurries of blow darts had already ceased.

“Hot damn!”

If he was going to make a break for it, this was the time to do it. Removing the machine gun from its mount, the warrior lashed together the containers of bombs and grenades and put them on his back. The load was over a hundred fifty pounds, but his gigantic form carried it easily. He slung the tin can holding the ammo belt over his left shoulder. That was another seventy pounds or so. No matter how tough this warrior was, he must have been nearly at the limit of what he could carry.

After pushing out the steps, Beatrice was just about to alight when he heard the sound of a motor up ahead. A fairly powerful engine.

“Oh joy, is that a tank?” he said, and then he saw it.

Jolting all the while, the daunting form revealed its titanic proportions. The gun protruding from its turret was short, but by way of compensation there were cannons of smaller bores and what appeared to be machine guns jutting out in all directions as if the tank were some unsettling porcupine.

“Uh-oh,” Beatrice said, jumping down.

Over two hundred twenty pounds of baggage threatened to buckle the warrior’s knees. But his lightweight alloy joints were sturdy under the load. After tripping while carrying almost four hundred fifty pounds some five years earlier, Beatrice had had both knees replaced.

Once again, as he rolled across the ground, he was assailed by a vicious blast. In addition to standard artillery, the tank was apparently armed with laser cannons. A crimson streak of light scored a direct hit on the flying platform, and then the machine swelled from within. A ball of flame pushed out against the iron plating, bursting through.

Beatrice didn’t stop. Showered with fiery bits and shrapnel, he rolled through the brush. Considering the load he was carrying, his speed was incredible. When he got up again as if he didn’t feel any weight at all, he was to the left and a little ahead of the tank. Not bothering to set down his load, he swung around with his right arm. Exhaling sharply, he let fly a huge object: a bomb. Being a warrior, he knew better than to waste time taking on a tank with a machine gun or hand grenades.

Like the flying machine it’d just destroyed, the fifty-ton mass of metal would

be torn apart as if it were papier-mâché.

“Huh?”

Before bewilderment could take hold of his body or his psyche, Beatrice leapt to one side. Overhead, a vicious burst of machine-gun fire whistled past.

There’d been no explosion.

“A misfire?”

He didn’t have time to lob a second bomb. All the tank’s guns took precise aim at the man with the cute name, determined not to allow him to escape this time.

III

Even after the man’s lips came away, Irene didn’t understand what’d happened. But relief besieged her.

It was just a kiss. I wasn’t bitten.

Now she could definitely sense the person standing before her. Even farther ahead, a tiny flame burned. While hardly sufficient to illuminate the chamber, it was enough to allow her to distinguish things at close range. Standing before Irene was a tall man in a deep purple cape. As for the one holding the approaching flame—when the figure came close enough to be hazily visible, Irene was shocked. It was the man who’d wanted to fight D in the barn back at the farmhouse. What a thing to have happen! The tiger had been interrupted by a wolf.

Halting fifteen to twenty feet from the two of them, the third person—Zenon—stared at them intently.

“After I fell from the sky, the ground where I landed gave way under me. This is quite the strange place I find myself in. So, are you a Noble?”

“I’m surprised a human made it this far,” the man said, an unearthly air gushing from every inch of him.

Irene clearly saw Zenon trembling.

“You’ve numbed me to the marrow of my bones. I’m Zenon. Are you Grand Duke Dorleac?”

“Oh, bravo. But unfortunately, that’s my father’s name.”

The outlaw had nothing to say to this.

“I have no name to give the likes of a human, but so be it. You’ve come to an interesting place to meet me, sir. So I shall give this as a souvenir to take with you into the afterlife. I am Baronet Drago Dorleac.”

“The son of a Noble—I suppose it’s not strange that they should have children,” Zenon said, grinning wryly.

Irene calmed down a bit. She’d noticed that Zenon didn’t seem at all afraid of the Noble. And unsurprisingly, she felt closer to the outlaw who’d put a knife to her throat than to a member of the Nobility.

Baronet Drago took an ominous step forward. To Irene, he seemed like a moving mountain.

“I’ve just awakened from a long sleep. I find myself a bit parched. And while the mercenaries were good enough to provide me with an offering, I now have an unwanted visitor. Still, you’re not an ordinary traveler, are you?”

“I guess I am now,” Zenon replied, his right hand going for his weapon’s hilt.

As Drago stared at him, the Nobleman’s eyes gradually began to give off a reddish glow.

“Ah, but you certainly seem like an average human—no, something’s different about you. What an intriguing man!”

Lifting Irene with ease, the Nobleman walked five paces to the right, set her down gently, and told her, “Stay there.” He then returned to his original location.

“I received word from my troops that a rather formidable foe was headed this way. Would that be you? No, I don’t think you could’ve safely come this far at your present level.”

“Hate to break it to you, but I’m not alone.”

“Oh really? In that case, what’s your aim? The jewels in my father’s castle?”

“That wouldn’t be too bad. But that’s not quite the deal. Are there humans in the castle?”

“Now that you mention it, when I awakened the soldiers, a number of humans fled there. Unfortunately.”

“What do you mean by that?” Zenon inquired calmly.

“The castle will shortly fall under my father’s control. Ah, but you needn’t worry. I’ll quickly wrest it from him.”

“You’re going to take your father’s castle?”

“Don’t look so surprised. It’s a common enough tale in the human world, I’m sure. The Nobility aren’t all that different. To you, we may appear supernatural, but we have the capacity for anger, hatred, joy, and even sadness—to a lamentable degree, I’m afraid. And it’s on account of this that I resurrected my troops.”

Safe a short distance away, Irene could feel something stirring in her chest. This Noble had awakened the soldiers to slay his father? Was the emotion that prompted such action anger or hatred—or something else?

“Good enough. Say no more, traveler, and be on your way—but you won’t go, now, will you?”

“Of course not,” Zenon replied, his scabbard disgorging a lengthy gleam of steel.

Baronet Drago raised his right hand. His cape had been draped over his arm, and the color of its lining now became clear. It was a vivid vermilion—the color of blood.

Zenon kicked off the ground in a mighty bound. The Nobleman’s right arm was extended almost as if he were inviting the outlaw to cut it—but as the sword swung at Drago’s elbow, sparks scattered in midair. Making a great leap back, Zenon stared at the three-foot-long blade that emerged from the baronet’s cape. This bizarre mechanism was Nobility technology. The outlaw had retreated without getting a blow in because of the terrific force and skill of the cape’s

sword.

“Considering who my father is, I’ve never been much for martial pursuits, you know. Therefore, I needed a suitable defense. And this one’s quite powerful.”

Grinning, Zenon said, “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

This time the baronet ran forward.

As the blade approached, Zenon brought his own sword up from a low position to bat it away. Not halting, he slashed with his sword at the Nobleman’s neck, but it was parried by the blade he’d just batted aside. Making additional slashes, they crossed blades three times, and then Zenon retreated.

The outlaw was furious. That was twice he’d had to fall back. His field of view was filled with blood. While crossing blades with the sword that stretched from the cape, he’d gotten the feeling he was sinking in a sea of blood.

“A draw? Most impressive,” the baronet laughed. “But it’s high time we finished this. I grow hungry, and it seems my father’s troops are trying to rally.”

The strange remark made Zenon furrow his brow. It was at that instant that a vermilion wave seemed to crest over him. Even before he realized it was the baronet’s cape, he’d been swallowed up by the surging wave.

Irene was watching so intently, she couldn’t shut her eyes now. The baronet’s cape spread like a nightmare, covering Zenon. Before she even had time to be surprised, it came away again—and Zenon reappeared. Vast quantities of bright blood were gushing from his right shoulder.

Though the baronet retreated with a silent grin, Irene felt she could hear him laughing. Zenon tumbled forward, and the girl was just about to run over to him when she was caught by the shoulder and yanked back. She wanted to resist, but she was suddenly drained of all her strength.

“Come with me, my little offering!”

The second the baronet finished speaking in that cold yet gentle voice, it became a brief cry of pain.

The grip on her shoulder eased, and Irene fell to the floor. She stared, spellbound. The baronet’s back had been transformed into a crimson cross. The

cross instantly lost its shape, becoming a dripping mass of fresh blood. Irene's eyes went wide.

Who'd launched that deadly attack? There was no one between the baronet and Zenon, and they were absolutely farther apart than any sword could reach.

"So, out *he* comes?" the baronet said, turning around. Though his face was distorted with agony, he wore a smile.

Before him, Zenon was getting back to his feet, the sword in his right hand leveled at the Nobleman. Pointing to his chest with his free hand, he said, "The other me wasn't quite up to the task. I'll take care of the fun stuff."

The outlaw's smile was so bright, so true. And so terrifying.

"Think you can parry *this*?" Zenon asked, using the sword in his right hand to make a horizontal slash.

The baronet leapt back instinctively. On landing, his left knee buckled. Though the outlaw had never touched him, his knee was sliced halfway through.

"That's a strange trick you have," the baronet laughed. "However, it won't slay a Noble. Look."

Drago stood up. Both his injured knee and split cape were instantly restored to normal.

"This is the power of a Noble. What of you? Can a mortal like you hope to match that power?"

Zenon smirked. "Yes, I can."

"What?"

"Don't you see? The Nobility are the living dead, but I died a long time ago."

Zenon adopted a figure-eight stance, his sword raised by his head like a baseball bat. When he brought it down, the blade would become infinitely long.

The baronet's expression changed.

Just then, dull but distinct impacts could be heard in the distance.

"Dear me—Father's outdone himself."

Turning to face the outlaw, the baronet threw his cape open. The blade that stretched from its lining became a single streak of light that sank into Zenon's chest. Zenon barely managed to deflect it, and then the blade went back.

"This, too, is the power of a Noble. I shall see the other *you* again, if the fates allow."

Seemingly pulled back into the darkness, the Nobleman's voice and all other trace of him dwindled into the distance.

As the stock-still Zenon looked down at Irene lying on the floor, the sound of countless footfalls and an overwhelming horde pressed toward them: forces belonging to the baronet's father.

A SHADOW OVER THE CASTLE RUINS

CHAPTER 7

I

When the guns turned his way, all Beatrice could do was grit his teeth. He'd missed his chance to run. Flames filled his field of view. He watched to see if they would billow toward him. Instead of jumping away, he hit the ground. What came wasn't a blast from the tank's gun. Twisted armor plating and scalding-hot pieces of pipe ripped through the air above him, and then the shock wave came. He thought it was going to carry away all the baggage on his back. Though he covered his ears, the massive explosion that occurred at such close quarters was trying its damnedest to shatter his eardrums.

Feeling woozy, Beatrice got to his feet. Flames burned in the spot where the tank had been. Distant areas of brush and stands of trees where the shrapnel had fallen were on fire. Apparently he'd been just the right distance away. Any closer and he would've been engulfed by the fireball, any farther away and he'd have probably been hit by shrapnel.

Beatrice had just one thought.

"Who the hell did that?" he said, wondering about the destruction of the tank.

Suddenly, a series of shots struck him in the temple. Leaving him numbed to the core of his brain, the blast had clearly come from a machine gun. The warrior thudded to the ground. But as he fell, he readied his own machine gun. He intended to fire wherever he sensed the enemy. Clearly there were a large number of them approaching.

Opening his eyes a crack, he watched intently. If Beatrice wasn't good at playing dead, he wouldn't have been in this line of work.

He sensed someone halting off to his left—it couldn't have been more than

three feet from him. There were four of them. Moving only his eyeballs, Beatrice watched through the crack in his eyelids.

What the hell? he thought.

The supernatural soldiers looked just like all the others he'd seen, except their uniforms were a different color. These seemed to be a deep green.

Is this another unit?

"Finish him," he heard someone say. One of them took the elongated, riflelike weapon he carried and aimed it right between Beatrice's eyes.

I'm afraid not, buddy!

Ready to jump up, Beatrice tried to pull the trigger back as far as it would go without firing.

"What the—" he exclaimed.

The trigger wouldn't budge. The warrior remembered that when he'd toppled, the firing mechanism had struck the ground.

That's all it takes to jam it? What a piece of shit! Beatrice thought, despair sinking into his heart like a knife.

A black gale unexpectedly gusted through the quartet. As they thudded to the ground, all of them split open at the shoulder.

"Heya!" the giant exclaimed, the tension immediately draining from him.

As the fallen Beatrice lay on the ground with one arm raised, just in front of him the gale took the form of D.

"You saved my hide," Beatrice said, winking at the Hunter. "Who are these jokers? They seem to belong to a different command from the others."

"The mercenaries split into two factions before they fought. Each side had their own employer."

"Who?"

"The battle in the past took place between Grand Duke Dorleac and his son. This is a repeat of that conflict."

“Just how do you know that? There’s no record of that crap anywhere!”

There was no reply.

“Why’d they fight?”

“It’s unclear.”

“Then you don’t know about this time, either, eh? Upsy-daisy!” Beatrice said, getting to his feet. “What happened to Mr. Twin Personalities?”

“At least *one of them* will be okay.”

“For a pretty face, you say some heartless shit, you know.”

Beatrice turned away from the four soldiers. Harsh cries and bursts of gunfire were audible.

“They die in battle, just so they can be revived and fight again? That’s gotta suck. I wonder if we’ll even be able to find that girl now.”

“Let’s go,” said the Hunter, leaving only his gorgeous voice behind.

Beatrice stared as the figure of unearthly beauty quickly walked away.

When they arrived ten minutes later, the fighting had ended.

“Well, that was pretty damned fast!”

It’d been a small encampment—one of fifty soldiers, at most. Yet now that not a single figure was moving, it was quite eerie. Tanks, artillery, and buildings had all been destroyed, and tiny fires danced all around. But what really caught the warrior’s eye was the soldiers’ corpses littering the ground.

“Wow, that’s some carnage right there. A thorough sweep. They took out everyone.”

“That’s funny.”

“Huh?” the warrior exclaimed, the eyes he had trained on D bulging in their sockets thanks to the hoarse voice he’d heard.

“Even if it was a surprise attack, these clowns were all set for battle. They’ve even got their weapons in hand. But there ain’t a single one of the enemy lying here.”

“Now that you mention it, all I see lying here are guys in gray. You know, sometimes you start sounding like an old geezer, right out of the blue.”

Without warning, D halted. “They’ve been drained,” he murmured.

“Just like in the legends,” the old geezer’s voice responded.

This is a hell of a time to be doing a ventriloquist act! Beatrice thought. *Is this some of that stand-up comedy like they do in the towns down south?*

“What legends?” Beatrice asked, with a bad feeling all the while.

The hoarse voice replied, “They say that while Dorleac’s son drank blood like a normal Noble, the Grand Duke sucked life directly from his prey. In other words, he was an aberration. One theory is that it was the grand duke’s manner of feeding that put him on the Sacred Ancestor’s bad side.”

“So, no love for the freak? . . . Huh?” Beatrice exclaimed, turning his gaze to his left at the same time D faced that way.

A wind blew at them, or something like a wind. Was it someone’s aura?

The barricades that shielded the encampment were all being destroyed by it. Beyond them, there was someone. No, *something*.

“Unbelievable,” Beatrice said, shuddering. Behind his teeth, he began chanting something. A spell for trapping spirits.

D simply stared, saying nothing.

Footsteps were approaching from the darkness. Though whoever it was should’ve felt D’s unearthly air, the figure didn’t seem to hesitate.

D’s eyes could see clearly. They made out a caped figure nearly seven feet tall. From either hand dangled what were apparently soldiers. He gripped them by the belts of their uniforms. Each step across the ground sounded like a spade cutting into the earth.

The figure in the dark green cape loomed about ten feet from D.

“Who are you, that you might enter the land of death I’ve prepared without any fear?”

“I’ll have your name first.”

At D's reply, the figure in green shivered faintly. "Such an exquisite voice—and what lovely features. Perhaps I shall have to fight you blind. O beauteous and fearless one, I am Grand Duke Dorleac."

"I'm known as D."

"Never heard of you. But I couldn't be happier! How pleasing, that a treasure like you has been born in the last five millennia. This far-too-tedious world still has its graces, it would seem."

"Why have you returned?" D asked bluntly.

"That I don't know," the giant in green—Grand Duke Dorleac—replied, his tone becoming distant. "Would that I'd been left at rest. But I'm not without my suspicions."

"And they would be?"

"My son Drago has also come back. It's likely due to that."

"You intend to slay your son?"

"My son is out to get me, just as in days of yore. And for that we incurred the wrath of the Sacred Ancestor."

"Why do the two of you fight?"

The grand duke's lips twisted, revealing his pearly teeth. The trenchant fangs characteristic of the Nobility were absent, for he had no need of them.

"I'm quite proud of these teeth, you know. They're much nicer than my son's."

Unexpectedly he raised his right hand high. The soldier he grasped stirred feebly. Apparently both were still alive.

"It's a woman," Beatrice croaked. It seemed he could also see quite well at night.

D's eyes had made out the lines of the pale woman trapped in the darkness. The grand duke's mouth approached her half-opened lips. A purplish glow linked the two of them. But it wasn't from the grand duke—it came from the female soldier.

The mercenary had weathered brutal training with her womanly curves intact,

but in the blink of an eye that softness was gone, exposing the underlying bones. At the same time, her skin lost its luster and yellowed, and she grew covered with time's malicious gifts—wrinkles. Though the transition seemed to occur endlessly, it actually took less than a second. The desiccated female soldier fell to the ground with a dry snap.

"He sucked the life right out of her," the hoarse voice groaned.

"Men may be more filling, but it's the women that taste the best," the grand duke remarked, lifting the soldier in his left hand—also female—up to his lips. But his weird consumption was halted by D's voice.

"These troops—your son's forces—made off with a woman. Where is she?"

"A very good question. We may be family, but at present we're also foes. I have no idea what he's doing. So, it's a mortal woman he made off with? When we hit them, I believe I'll take the woman as well."

"One thing more. When your soldiers came back, some people took refuge in your castle. Are they safe?"

"I believe so—if they're in the castle. Come with me." In the darkness he grinned, saying, "But first, let me finish this second one off—"

Just then, the grand duke looked overhead. A supernatural bird was swooping down at him—an ominous creature beloved of the pitch-black night. It glided on outspread black wings, and it had something longer and sharper than talons aimed at the top of the Noble's head.

The grand duke opened his mouth—almost as if the beauty of the supernatural bird descending on him had entranced him—and from his mouth he discharged a glistening jewel. Before the green jewel could sink into the Hunter's forehead, the sword cut through it. An explosion of light turned night into day, and D was thrown back. He landed some thirty feet away, and smoke poured from his body.

The grand duke's laughter rolled across the death-strewn battlefield.

"Most impressive. You parry the energy of a thousand lives with a sword, of all things, and come off no worse than that? Well, time for a second wave."

The Noble raised his right hand high. However, his arm fell off at the shoulder,

crushing the neck of the desiccated female soldier with a grave sound. The grand duke's unearthly air became one of terror when black blood bubbled and dripped from the wound.

"You—you've taken a Noble's arm off at the shoulder . . . Who are you?"

"D."

The grand duke heard the reply at his chest. The speed with which the Hunter had bridged the distance between them was startling; the Nobleman didn't even know when his adversary had assumed a stance or made his thrust. A blade the hue of darkness now pierced the life-sucking demon through the chest and out the back. Releasing the woman in his left hand, the grand duke staggered.

"You bastard . . . you ran me right through my most vital point," Dorleac said, and then he smiled. "But that won't slay me. You see that by now, don't you?"

Had any foe of D's ever been so smug?

"Try to take my left arm," he said, his mouth snapping open, his throat revealed.

II

Once more the power of the lives he'd taken shot out. A green globe a mere two inches in diameter sank into D's forehead, intent on incinerating him.

"*What?*"

Eyes agleam with reflected green light betrayed tumultuous shock as they gazed at the fireball fading into thin air. In a fraction of a second, the mass had vanished, and the mouth that'd swallowed it had closed. Lowering the left hand he'd held out in front of his brow, D pushed against the sword he was still holding through Grand Duke Dorleac's chest.

A strange roar that sounded like massive artillery split the night. The grand duke's body was sent flying like so much twisted shrapnel. The twenty yards he sailed was twice D's distance. The Nobleman knew of nothing that could hurl his titanic form so far with such ease. Landing on his feet, he found the ground that

supported him had sunk substantially. Cracks ran off in all directions, like a spider's web.

"You have a power to rival the life force that remains within me—so, who in damnation are you?"

Not answering, D made a sweep with his left arm. But his rough wooden needles were batted down with a single flourish of the grand duke's cape.

Neither of them had lost even the slightest intention of fighting. D held his sword at eye level and aimed right at his foe, apparently anticipating the grand duke's next shot, but the Nobleman's mouth was shut tight.

Just then, a lone bat flitted down and landed on the grand duke's shoulder. The Noble's cruelly elegant countenance flooded with a blood-freezing look of malice.

"This duel must wait," the Nobleman said.

And with that, the bat took off. As the bat ascended with a speed unimaginable, the grand duke clung to its feet with his left hand. Apparently the bat was not of this world. A few flaps of its wings and it'd risen a good fifty yards to meld with the darkness.

"Well, he got away!"

D asked the hoarse voice, "Did you hear that?"

"Yep. Damned if it didn't say something about his kid throwing down the gauntlet," the left hand replied, for it had no trouble deciphering the bat's voice that even D couldn't make out. "Father and son both do things big—so, what's your next move?"

"Look for Irene, then set off for the castle."

"Hmm. Think finding her's gonna be that easy?"

"I'll search for an hour, and if I haven't found her by then, that's the end of it."

"Isn't that pretty cold?"

"My work is up at the castle."

The Hunter's bizarre one-man dialogue was interrupted by a certain warrior,

who said, “Hey, I’m going too, D!”

“Do as you like,” D replied.

“But what about the others?” Beatrice asked. He was referring to Strider and Stanza, who were still back at the rest area.

“If they don’t come, we get their share. I would think that’d appeal to you.”

“Galloon galloon!” Beatrice exclaimed, expressing his thanks with words from an ancient people now long vanished. The gigantic warrior was beaming. Apparently he liked the way the conversation had turned.

“Well, time to start searching?” the warrior asked.

Zenon opened his eyes. Above him, he saw a strange sight: a girl with a big chunk of stone raised high above her head.

When their eyes met, the girl grimaced, asking, “Are you okay?”

“I think so,” Zenon replied, putting his hand against his feverish shoulder where the baronet had cut him. The bleeding had stopped. This waking was the same as always. It was *his* doing.

What happened, then? he thought, even though he really didn’t want to know.

“How about you put that down?” the outlaw said to Irene, who was still holding the stone.

“I think you’ve got a point. I’ve been holding it like this for two minutes. My arms are getting tired.”

Given a good toss, the chunk of stone landed to the right of Zenon’s face. Irene let out a deep breath.

Zenon sat up. His muscles and nerves screamed with agony. He managed to express the pain with no more than a slight tightening of his cheeks as he tried to get to his feet.

“It’s too soon for that!” Irene told him, stopping him. Her desolate tone made Zenon stare at her.

“What happened?” he said, not wanting to ask, *What did I do?*

Irene lowered her gaze. “The *other* you threatened me. He told me he was going to lay low for now. And he said I was free to run if I liked, but if I tried to hurt him, he’d make me pay.”

He didn’t imagine that was all it’d taken for her to want to bash his brains in. Wanting to know what had transpired after the Nobleman split his shoulder open, he once again asked, “What happened?”

Shutting her eyes, Irene leaned back against a nearby pile of rubble. It was probably part of the collapsed ceiling. Given that they could build palaces that stood up to a direct hit from a hydrogen bomb, the Nobility were funny. Decay seemed to be one of their tastes.

“There,” the girl said, pointing to the right—the direction from which the intruders had come.

Zenon stood up. His legs wobbled, and intermittent bouts of dizziness assailed him. His artificial bone marrow was working overtime to make up for all the blood he’d lost. His right shoulder was hot and numb.

He had the answer to his question soon enough—before he’d gone fifty paces. Zenon didn’t divert his gaze from the scene spread before him. It was the result of his own actions. His eyes alone weren’t enough—he had to let it all seep into his body.

Irene was still leaning against the rubble. Noticing Zenon, she asked, “You saw them?” She sounded absolutely exhausted. She must’ve witnessed the whole thing. No matter how severe the girl’s life on the Frontier might’ve been, she couldn’t see something like this and not have it affect her.

“You, too?”

She nodded, saying, “You’re really something, you know that? How many of them were there?”

“Around seventy.”

“And you killed them all in less than five minutes’ time. It made my palms sweat,” Irene said, closing her eyes. Her eyelashes were trembling. She was going

through the whole scene again. There was nothing she could do to stop the memories.

Plopping himself down on the ground, Zenon laid back. “I’d tell you it wasn’t me,” he said to her, “but what’s the point? That rock you had earlier—I don’t care if you drop it on me.”

“It’s a little late for that now!” Irene replied, shaking her head repeatedly. “You saw them, right? Some of those soldiers were women and children! But you were merciless. What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“If I said it was because they attacked me, wouldn’t that count for something?”

“You even cut down the ones that ran away. They were kids!”

Zenon let out a long sigh.

Silence descended, the kind of silence on which no one wished to intrude.

Soon, a faint sobbing began to fill the air. Irene’s body was quaking. Her sobs flowed through the murky world like an unending stream of woe.

It was unclear how many minutes passed. Suddenly, Irene lifted her head.

Fortunately, they were able to locate one magneto car that was only slightly damaged. Opening the hood to examine the engine, Beatrice stated, “It’s okay. I’ll have ’er fixed inside of five minutes.” To D he then said, “All the tools are here and everything—but are you sure you’re okay with this?”

He was talking about Irene and Zenon. Though they’d searched for an hour, they hadn’t found any trace of either one.

“Are you worried?” D asked.

“No, not really,” Beatrice replied, already busy with his repairs. Wherever his fingers made contact with the exposed engine, blue sparks flew.

“A long time ago, I heard about a certain Hunter of Nobility. It seems he was even better at repair work than he was at Hunting.”

“Wow, that’s really something else.”

“Only, he had one fatal flaw.”

“Really? What’s that?”

“He was too kindhearted.”

“I see. That’s not the sort of thing that mixes with the Hunter profession, is it?”

“I hear that’s why he retired. He was only active for about three years.”

“But in that span of time, I bet he put a lot of ’em down, eh?”

“A hundred and one, I heard.”

“How about you?”

“Not even close.”

“I’m sure he regrets it. Taking all those lives, I mean, Nobility or not. He probably realized that sooner or later, his time was gonna come, too. And once he did, he couldn’t work as a Hunter anymore. He must’ve got out to live his life, taking the money he’d socked away and starting a repair shop for farm equipment somewhere or something.”

While this conversation was taking place, the gigantic warrior’s hands continued their deft movements, and before two minutes had elapsed, he stood up again and said, “All right, now she’s just perfect!” Slamming the hood shut, he gave it a couple of pats.

“Shall we go?” D said. The darkness was receding from his face.

Beatrice turned his gaze to the east. Shadow and light were swapping places.

“It’s dawn,” he said.

From much higher up, a single streak of light knifed obliquely through the darkness. Death and darkness left as a new time began.

Zenon’s face took on a white glow.

“Dawn!” Irene declared.

Carrying the Hunter and the warrior, the magneto car ripped through the wind with a speed that hardly suited its stocky appearance. Beatrice had settled into

the driver's compartment, while D was in the combination seating area and cargo bed behind him.

"What'd I tell you? She's just perfect. She'll do up to a hundred twenty. If we gun it, we could get to the ruins in three hours."

"If there ain't interference, that is."

"You know, it's creepy when you do that hoarse voice, D. Knock it off."

"I wish I could."

"Damned joker," Beatrice grumbled, and then he turned his head and twitched his nose. "Something smells good. Hey, D, you think maybe there's a service area around here that hasn't—"

"It's the enemy."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Still—"

He cut the wheel sharply to the right. They raced through a dense forest.

The palm of D's left hand was placed against the scruff of the warrior's neck.

Mumbling something unintelligible, Beatrice decreased their speed as if in a trance. A second later, the vehicle pitched wildly. The two men and their cargo flew through the air. While the magneto car rolled, kicking up black soil, D watched from the spot where he'd landed more than fifteen feet away. In his arms he carried Beatrice, the machine gun, and the ammo. Only the box of grenades was in the car.

"That's some lousy driving."

Not replying to the hoarse voice, D stared straight ahead. "It was control smoke," he said.

"Hmph. That stuff can even reel in someone with a full stomach. But it ain't the army."

"The lord of the forest?" D said in reply, but just then from beyond a stand of trees to his left there was a sound like a great rumbling in the earth drawing nearer. The sound of something scraping against the ground.

III

What pushed its way through the stand of trees resembled a ham split down the middle. It was easily fifty feet high. As for its length, that was unclear—it stretched back into the forest. D noticed that above them and below them, to their left and to their right, innumerable forms were running or flying toward it. Rabbits, fox monsters, forest hippos, bristle beasts, fire tigers, flying snakes, air squids—the kind of menagerie that could be found only on the Frontier. And it was obvious that all of them had been drawn by the “control smoke.”

A small hole opened in the center of the sharp, semicircular muzzle, and then spread across its entirety. All the creatures, large and small, were sucked in. Once the last of them had disappeared, the bizarre mouth—or entrance—returned to normal, and the enormous creature wriggled like a titanic serpent as it vanished back through the stand of trees.

Putting his left hand against the crown of the giant’s head, D returned Beatrice to consciousness. And then he broke into a run. Beatrice followed him. Reaching the rolled magneto car, D easily righted the vehicle. This time, he took the driver’s seat.

“Oh, yeah!” Beatrice exclaimed, seating himself in the back.

D stepped on the accelerator. They didn’t move. Though he made five attempts in a row, the result was the same every time.

“You said it was perfect, didn’t you?” D said softly, giving Beatrice a look.

“I thought so. There’s gotta be some mistake. It can’t be my repairs. The car’s the problem.”

“The whole point of repairs is to fix the problems.”

The gigantic warrior growled.

D quickly alighted from the defective vehicle. At the same time, he bounded off the ground. That was normal for D, but Beatrice did likewise.

Where the two of them had been, nearly a hundred slender blow darts jabbed into the ground. White smoke poured from the earth.

The blow darts had come from all sides. As the two dashed toward the only safe zone—the point at which the enormous serpent had disappeared—gleaming darts pursued them. The blow darts D fended off with the hem of his coat fell to the ground, while those that stuck into Beatrice fell free again. He'd applied a fresh layer of the protective spray before entering the forest.

Out of the trees dropped figures with machetes in hand. Beneath them, D's right hand flashed into action. By the time a bloody cloud had engulfed each and every bisected torso, D had already dashed off.

Next to the Hunter, there was the endless staccato of gunfire: Beatrice and his machine gun. Even carrying a twenty-pound gun and more than a hundred pounds of ammunition, he still kept pace with D. What's more, not a bullet fired at their scattering foes went to waste. With short bursts of three rounds each, he took them down surgically.

Suddenly, their way was blocked by enormous figures in gray. It was said ten-foot-tall soldiers like these had been created to suit the Nobility's own tastes. They already had the longswords in their right hands raised high.

As a blade seared through the air, D was beneath it with his own sword ready to parry, though it didn't look up to the task. The instant the swords crashed together, D's blade shot upward. His arms raised as if in a cheer, he made a second strike. He cut halfway through one giant's torso. Ignoring its titanic frame as it fell with a force that made the earth tremble, D leapt, evading the sword of a second one and slashing him open from the top of his head all the way down to his sternum. Beatrice gunned down two more.

The giants fell back. They formed a ring, with their two foes in the center.

"Maybe they wanna talk this out, you think?" Beatrice said, using one hand to mop the sweat from his brow.

"Can you come up with terms for a cease-fire?" the hoarse voice asked.

"Here they come," said D.

In front of the giants who'd tasted his sword, new gigantic forms appeared. Above their heads they held wooden clubs covered with barbs. They swung them wildly toward the ground. The reverberations that rose from the depths of the

earth knocked Beatrice on his side. There was another blow—and not only did the shock of the impact throw the warrior into the air, but it completely upset his inner sense of balance. He was vomiting before he even had a chance to try to keep it in. This was no time for firing his machine gun. His internal organs felt like they'd been flipped upside down and turned inside out.

But a hand with a grip like steel grabbed the warrior by the scruff of the neck. It was D, his face clearly distorted with pain.

"If this keeps up, my guts are gonna . . ."

Nevertheless, there was nowhere to run.

They were standing on the ground. Beatrice immediately felt himself being hurled into the air. His innards settled down. At that moment, he realized what he was supposed to do. From fifteen feet in the air, he opened fire on the ring of giants. Two of them dropped to their knees. The circle was broken.

D sprinted. Becoming a black gale, he wove his way between the giants. In the span of two breaths, all of them lay on the ground.

Turning, the Hunter saw Beatrice running toward him. Behind the warrior came the sound of footsteps crushing forward like a tidal wave. Since the giants had failed, the forward guard had been sent in.

"Yee-haw!" Beatrice shouted, and he was just bringing his machine gun to bear on them when he was asked an odd question.

"Can you climb trees?"

"Huh?"

By the time the warrior replied, the Hunter was flying like a black supernatural bird to land on a thick branch in a colossal tree.

"Well, let's see how he does," the hoarse voice said with amusement, and just then, Beatrice leapt onto a massive branch in another tree about ten feet away. "Wow, carrying the gun and ammo, to boot. Not too shabby."

It was at this point that figures in green appeared from the direction D and the warrior were facing. In the light of dawn, the soldiers crashed together like waves of gray and green. Battle cries, gunshots, and the ring of steel on steel

filled the forest, and occasionally flashes of what seemed to be lasers streaked across the dawn sky.

“Hey!” Beatrice called over. His hand was over his lips, and the words themselves didn’t escape. It was a means of conversing unique to Hunters. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Looks like father and son have locked horns. We’ll look for an opening, and then get going,” D replied in the same voiceless manner. He didn’t even have his hand up to his mouth.

“Oh, it seems such a waste to just run off,” Beatrice responded.

Nothing from the Hunter.

“Look how fierce the fighting is. To the rear, it’s gotta be just as chaotic. I’m gonna go filch us some transportation. Don’t try to stop me!”

And saying this, Beatrice leapt down into the eddying melee without even waiting for a reply. He was soon swallowed up by the chaos of swordplay, shooting, and grappling.

“Ain’t he the reckless one,” the hoarse voice remarked, dumbfounded.

Not replying, D merely kept his gaze trained where Beatrice had vanished. Whether he was worried about the warrior and intended to stop him were the real questions. Even the ever-intensifying battle below grew calm before long, with only groans flowing out into the forest by the rays of dawn, and those also quickly ceased.

“That’s an awful lot of death for the start of a day,” the hoarse voice said, and it too sounded weary.

D easily alighted from the massive branch.

“Ol’ sissy name’s not coming back, is he?” the hoarse voice whined.

“Is that what you think?”

“You think I’m wrong?”

D turned his head slightly. He turned his left hand in the same direction.

“Eh?” the hoarse voice exclaimed, as it heard the sound of an approaching

engine.

Before long, an incredibly outdated internal-combustion-driven single-seat vehicle with two wheels—in other words, a motorcycle—deftly wove its way through the corpses to stop beside the Hunter.

“Heya!” said Beatrice, of course, lifting his goggles up onto the leather helmet. He wore a leather jacket as well, and he had the machine gun and ammo in his right hand.

A wry smile wafted to D’s lips. He realized he’d underestimated Beatrice’s startling ability to procure things.

“Well, hop on! The magneto car didn’t work out too well, but this baby’s easy to drive and fix.”

Saying nothing as he watched the enormous warrior slap the seat behind him, D got on.

“Hmm, your legs have no problem touching the ground, eh? Kinda strange how all your height’s in them instead of your trunk. Well, this’ll probably toss your guts around pretty good. Ha ha ha!”

Quite pleased with himself, the cackling Beatrice clutched his belly as he started the bike.

“We’ll cut through the forest for a ways.”

Skillfully weaving between stands of trees, they sped along.

After a while, D said, “Looks like your right hand’s carrying quite a load.” It was rare for him to make such a comment.

“And?”

“Would you like to pass it to me?”

“Sorry, but it’s just not in my nature to trust folks. Let’s say you were to drop it, and then I needed it. I wouldn’t blame you, but I’d be mad as hell with myself for being so stupid. Don’t worry. Both my arms have had cyborg upgrades. You know, back in my old job—huh?”

The faces of both men turned simultaneously toward the highway—or the sky

above it, to be precise. A stocky flying machine was zipping along there. The rapidly dwindling craft had a small window at its center, and through it they saw someone.

"That's Stanza!" Beatrice said, clucking his tongue. "Those idiots. That's what they get for lying around. I bet they're both in there!"

"Probably."

"Where do you think they're headed?"

"The ruins, most likely. It was green."

The flying machine had been painted in Grand Duke Dorleac's color.

Seeming blinded by the light, Beatrice looked up at the dawn sky and said, "They went to the trouble of taking 'em prisoner. I don't figure they'll kill 'em soon. More than that, I'm worried about whoever took refuge in the castle ruins earlier." He paused for a moment. "Because I get the feeling that freak's got one hell of an appetite."

There was no reply. This in itself signaled the Hunter's agreement.

Suddenly, Beatrice's form stiffened. "That big vacuum-cleaner deal earlier—that's not . . . I mean, that monstrosity . . . it's just sucking up living creatures indiscriminately . . ."

"You know it."

"I thought I told you to stop using that creepy old voice," Beatrice shouted. "Imagine dozens of those things. If left to their own devices, they'd drain all the life not just out of this area, but from the whole damned planet!" he said in a horrified manner. "And all of it gets sucked up by Dorleac . . ."

"Step on it. At this rate, we'll be there by noon!"

"Quit it with that geezer voice!" Beatrice shouted, twisting the throttle as if to shake off his fears.

UNHOLY FATHER AND SON

CHAPTER 8

I

Just as a shadow seemed to scud across the sun, a milky hue began to drift through the world. A fog.

“Here it comes! Here it comes!” Beatrice shouted, almost singing the words.

The motorcycle slowed down.

“According to my notebook, they were in this stuff when the first three bought the farm,” the warrior said, raising the machine gun he’d been carrying. Setting the barrel on top of the handlebars, he shifted it slightly, testing how the weapon would react.

“You can’t slay a Noble with that,” D told the man.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got that covered,” Beatrice replied, tapping the chest of his leather jacket. There was the sound of wood knocking on wood. “Get off. There’s no point broadcasting our location. It was just ahead where we got hit.”

“Do you remember what killed them?” D inquired.

“Not at all. But it said in my notes that all of ’em had their necks split open. I caught my sleeve on a branch, which slowed me down and apparently saved me. According to three who got away—”

The milky hue stained everything before the pair. The fog was gusting toward them.

“What the hell?” Beatrice cried, but even before he did, he’d raised both hands. The blade that slashed against the machine gun made a terrific noise and gave off sparks as it was deflected.

The enemy was in the fog.

No freaking time to get into position, Beatrice thought, swinging the weapon over his head and at the figure before him. It collided with the blade that was coming at him again, leaving his opponent reeling. But his foe didn't fall.

This here's a tough bastard. Just like me.

Inspiration instantly struck him, and Beatrice charged forward. With his second step, he pulled out one of the wooden stakes he had stuck in his leather jacket, and around the third or fourth step he rammed it toward his opponent's chest. His left hand pushed away his foe's sword.

The stake struck his opponent between the sixth and seventh ribs, piercing his heart. A cry flew from him, and he shuddered from head to toe. Ignoring the warrior's hand and trying to pull the stake back out, the foe kicked off the ground powerfully. Before his opponent could retreat, all but the portion of the stake in Beatrice's fist had been buried in his chest.

As his enemy fell on his back, bright blood gushed from his mouth. The shock of the body hitting the ground cleared the fog, showing Beatrice the form of his enemy. He was stunned—but he also thought, *I was right after all*.

One of the survivors, a man named Joseph, had told the warrior they'd been attacked by copies of themselves.

Beatrice looked at D. The Hunter was just sheathing his blade. A figure in black lay at his feet. Although the returning fog kept the warrior from seeing the face, he did get a glimpse of his hand and sword blade. He had the exact same sword as D.

"Hey, D?"

"So, the figures reflected in the fog are our enemies?" said the same quiet voice as always, setting Beatrice at ease.

"Well, looks like we managed to take care of these ones. But the master of the castle has come back to life. No telling what in blazes is in store for us now."

"Why don't you turn back, then?"

"Oh, I wish to hell I could. But, you see, I tend to let the drink get the best of

me.”

“You don’t say?” the hoarse voice remarked.

“Knock if off with that voice!”

“So, what does that have to do with this?” D asked, apparently taking an interest. It wasn’t often that he did that.

“Every time I hit a watering hole, I ended up asking some woman there to marry me. By the time I realized they were after my money, I’d already gone through seven wives. As a result, I’m flat broke. So I figured I’d do something to take care of myself in my old age.”

The two men began walking through the fog.

“You know the way?” the hoarse voice inquired.

Though Beatrice gave the Hunter a protracted glare, he seemed resigned, saying nothing but giving a toss of his chin in the forward direction.

They wove through the stands of trees in silence.

“Hey, are you sure about this?” the hoarse voice teased.

Turning around, Beatrice barked, “Put a cork in it! This part I can remember well enough. Just shut up and follow me.”

The warrior seemed to have absolute confidence in the memories he’d laid down in his notebook.

“It was thirteen years ago you were here. The trees and branches must’ve changed some since then,” the hoarse voice said.

“I’m aware of that. It should all be in the notebook. And stop saying everything in that freaking weird voice!”

“Just as I thought,” said D after the undignified exchange. “Beatrice Gilbey—it seems everyone who ever underestimated you because you had a girl’s name wound up missing or dead.”

“You’ve got the wrong guy,” the warrior replied with a big laugh that seemed to get a lot of use. He didn’t realize that a grin had skimmed across D’s lips. “I’m not someone powerful like that. I am just a lousy, third-rate Hunter. If I wasn’t, I

wouldn’t need money so bad I had to go back to that God-awful place.”

“You’re earning money for tuition,” the hoarse voice said.

“This is kind of strange,” Beatrice said, rubbing his beard and changing the topic. “Not many of those damn mercs around, are there? I can’t help thinking how odd it is we’ve been able to go through the forest so easily.”

“They haven’t fully awakened yet,” said D.

“What?”

When Beatrice looked back at him, D continued, “I’m not talking about the spirits of Dorleac and his son. I mean the power that resurrected the mercenaries.”

“I see. So it’s kind of groggy? Interesting. That’d make sense, I suppose. But if that’s the case, we’ll be in for some real trouble before long. I don’t know how large these armies will get, but if they meet head on, forget this sector; they’ll leave the whole Frontier in flames!”

The warrior halted. When he turned again, his face was plastered with the expression of an average person who’d been confronted with a horrible truth.

“Under these circumstances, rescuing those hostages isn’t gonna do squat. This is turning into another job altogether.”

What that was went without saying. Dorleac and his son would have to be slain if the Frontier was to be saved from destruction.

“At any rate, it’ll be impossible to rescue the hostages without fighting the two of them. Are you scared?” D asked.

“You bet your ass I am! Not every Hunter in the world’s like you, you know!” Scratching the back of his head in frustration, the gigantic warrior said soberly, “Say . . . You think I could collect the Nobility disposal fee from the mayor?”

“Just full of confidence, aren’t you?” D replied, and he probably wanted to smile wryly.

After they’d walked for about thirty minutes, a black stone wall appeared before them, seemingly pushing its way out of the fog.

“We’re there,” Beatrice said, rubbing his hands together.

“It’s kinda small,” the hoarse voice remarked, referring to the gate in the wall.

“Of course, it’s the back door. Still, there’s a guard posted of a good three hundred men and one, two, three . . . sixteen APCs. And I bet that’s nothing compared to the front gate.”

“We’re going in.”

“How? If they get even the tiniest bit suspicious, they’ll raise an alarm inside. And if that freak finds out, we’ll have real trouble. They’ve got Strider and Stanza prisoner!”

“Follow me,” said the Hunter.

“Yeah, okay. I guess.”

Returning to the forest, D walked over to a huge tree without hesitation. An ultracedar, it was well over 150 feet tall. Around it was a stand of the same species, challenging heavens tinged with the deep blue of twilight.

“Hop on my back,” said the Hunter.

“What?”

“I’ll leave you behind.”

“O-okay,” Beatrice stammered, a question mark still hanging over his head as he attached himself to D’s broad back. Including his weapons and ammunition, it had to be a load in excess of 650 pounds. “What the—?”

Not seeming to even notice the weight, D had begun to effortlessly climb the tree. He wasn’t shinnying up it. Rather, he glided up the bark like a veritable insect or lizard, taking less than ten seconds to reach the midpoint—a thick branch over sixty feet from the ground. The castle’s rear gate loomed a mere fifty yards from the base of the tree.

D’s eyes locked on another ultracedar—this one about ten yards ahead of them. On his back, Beatrice suddenly stirred.

“Hey, don’t tell me you’re gonna—” the giant started to say, and then he took a deep breath. Apparently the plan dawned on him when he followed D’s eyes.

D’s right hand slipped into an interior coat pocket, and as he pulled it out again, a line of black flew out horizontally from between the Hunter’s fingers into the hazy moonlight. It was a reinforced fiber thread. Only once did he tug on it to check if it was secure. The foliage of the other ultracedar rustled in response. The thread had coiled around a thick branch thirty or forty feet higher than they were.

“Here we go,” D announced.

“Go? Hey!” Beatrice exclaimed, his words hanging in midair.

Like an enormous pendulum, the bodies of the men arced across the sky. Once the thread had stretched as far as it could, an internal cutter snipped the line, and the pair sailed through the air. Beatrice’s bulging eyes peeked over D’s shoulder. Though he could see the soldiers and their armored vehicles below, no one looked up.

Easily clearing the gate, they landed inside without anyone noticing them. The force of the impact spread through the two men, but Beatrice was stunned by how slight it was. And their landing had hardly made any noise at all. Beatrice quickly clambered off, and D got up and surveyed their surroundings.

“Not one,” the hoarse voice said, offering its conclusion. It was referring to the soldiers.

The two men swiftly made their way over to a colossal building, and D’s left hand wrapped around the iron doorknob set in the wall. It was locked. Something like white steam enveloped the doorknob. The door was given a light push, and the pair entered.

“What kind of trick was that?” Beatrice inquired in a scratchy tone.

A faint murkiness shrouded the hall. Though the lights weren’t on, there was apparently some illumination.

Gazing coldly at Beatrice, D said, “The dungeon’s first.”

“Yipes!”

“You don’t have to come if you don’t want to.”

Beatrice looked like a simple farmer who’d just been witness to a miracle.

“Now, don’t tell me you’re all worried on my account.” His expression growing sober, the warrior declared firmly, “No, I’m sticking with you. Can’t have you grabbing all the fame and fortune alone.”

II

Traversing a long corridor and taking numerous turns, they suddenly came to a dark area. There were doors all along the wall.

“What have we here?” Beatrice said, taking a sniff. “Hey . . .” the warrior began, turning around.

D had halted, his right sleeve over his nose and mouth.

Beatrice felt every hair on his body rise on end. He could hear every drop of blood freezing in his veins. The young man’s beauty was due to his dhampir blood. In other words, the blood of the Nobility. What now drifted through the corridor was sure to drive him mad: the stench of blood.

D had his eyes closed.

Shifting the machine gun over to his left hand, Beatrice drew a stake with his right. “Hey,” he called out to the Hunter.

D’s eyes were slowly opening. Beatrice swallowed hard. They were giving off a red glow.

“D?” he called over to the Hunter in a low voice, and his tone carried a certain resolve.

The glow faded. Beatrice’s hirsute face was now reflected in the blackness of D’s pupils.

The tension drained from the warrior.

D then took the lead, walking until he halted before a certain door. This was where the stink of blood was coming from. The door creaked as it opened. As a sensation more powerful than just the stench assailed his nostrils and spread through his brain, Beatrice fought desperately to keep from gagging. He was

afraid to see what was beyond the door—the source of the eddying odor. D was inside. The warrior could see his broad back. Slowly coming up behind the Hunter, Beatrice peered through the gloom shrouding the room.

Humans hung from the ceiling. The dungeon was about the size of the town hall in a small village. There appeared to be nearly a hundred people there, with limbs dangling limply. Male and female, young and old. The raiment of all had dried to black. They'd all been soaked in blood.

"His throat's been slit," Beatrice said, looking up at the corpse of a young man that hung directly overhead and scratching at the back of his own head in puzzlement. "I don't know about his kid, but Dorleac probably did this—and he didn't cut them to drink their damned blood!"

Beatrice lowered his eyes. The floor was still coated with black. The blood that'd spilled from their throats had coursed down their bodies to cover the floor. And there it had dried. The Noble had slit their throats, but hadn't drunk a single drop of blood. What had awaited the people who'd fled there in desperation was cruel slaughter.

D walked to the back of the dungeon. Suddenly he halted and looked down. A rag doll lay there. It'd been lovingly repaired time and again. Surely it was quite important to the child who'd owned it and the parents who'd kept it in good repair. D looked up. A figure in a red skirt hung above it.

"What was the point of this?" Beatrice asked, diverting his gaze.

There was no reply.

His anger unexpectedly coming in a red-hot mass, the giant continued, "Don't you know? Well, I'll tell you, then. It's just another one of the Nobility's pointless amusements. You must know about the Nobility and their human hunts. They grab a bunch of people, take 'em back to their castle, let 'em go, then chase 'em all down. If they make it till daybreak, good for them. If not, they get their blood sucked on the spot, or if the Noble's full, they're killed in some other way. You've probably seen the holographic images of their victims, skin flayed off 'em and sealed away in a coffin while they were still alive. These folks got a taste of the same. So, tell me how it feels. You must know, Mr. Dhampir, with that Noble blood running through you!"

Beatrice felt his rage rapidly withering. All that remained was regret.

“Sorry, I just get so—”

“I know how you feel,” D said. “You don’t have to apologize to me. Hold onto that anger. Keep it until we run into a Noble.”

“I sure as hell will,” Beatrice replied, nodding. Cold sweat streamed down his cheeks.

“The torture chamber next?” D said.

“Torture chamber?”

“Those two warriors should be there. And if there are any other survivors, they’ll be in the same place.”

“Oh, I see.”

When a Noble wanted to hurt a human being, he didn’t have to go to much trouble. If he bothered to bring someone back to his torture chamber, it would be for some horrible amusement.

“Have those old memories come back to you?” asked the Hunter.

“Nope. But I’m probably better off without ’em. After all, it seems I spent ten days here without finding so much as a single coin.”

“This time will probably be the same,” D told him.

“In that case, let’s hurry up and get the hell out of here. No one told us a damned thing about putting down any Nobles. But if the master of the castle is back, it wouldn’t be so strange if his loot’s come back, too.”

“No, in fact, that’d be really strange!”

“Knock it off with that voice. And if I decide to go and make like a burglar, don’t tell anyone about it, okay?”

“Then why don’t you get to it already?”

“I thought I told you to give that voice a rest,” said Beatrice. “So, what’ll we do about these remains?”

“There’s no time for that. And if the castle returns to full operation, we’ll have

trouble.”

“Damn, you’re a cold one, aren’t you?”

“Maybe the problem’s in my blood?”

“Oh, come on, don’t say that!” Scratching his head, Beatrice gave a pained look to the corpses dangling from the ceiling. “God willing, we’ll come back for you.”

He then headed for the door.

With his first step beyond it, the giant’s eyes bulged in their sockets. No trace remained of the dust that’d coated the corridor, and the portraits that’d been decaying on the floor had returned to their former color and splendor and now adorned the walls. Flames burned on the opposite wall, illuminating the corridor.

“Hey, it really has come back to life!” Beatrice joyously exclaimed. “My work’s done now. This is where we part company. I might not have found the treasure trove, but one of those paintings or candelabras over there could turn into some serious money. Say, why don’t you call it a day on the mission, too? What do you say to working together to find the treasure? How does an even split sound?”

Not replying, D walked away.

“Damn, that’s one stubborn fella there. Well, his loss.”

With a look of elation spread across his countenance, Beatrice closed his eyes and began rubbing his hands together as if a heavenly banquet had been set before him.

“Damn it—let me out of here, you worthless piece of shit Noble!” Strider bellowed from where he lay on the stone floor.

Seated with her back against the wall, Stanza told him, “Shut up already. Try to at least die with some dignity.”

“Don’t jinx us like that, you damned idiot!”

“Don’t blame it on me. This is a torture chamber, after all. Whoever’s in charge should be around before long.”

“You—you think it’s a Noble?” Strider stammered.

“Seeing as they went to all the trouble of bringing us here, probably. And since you had to go out and have a look around, I wound up getting tangled up in this mess, too!”

Before dawn, Strider had gotten worried about the long absence of D and the other two. Saying he was damned if he’d let them leave him behind, the warrior had set out to catch up with them. Though Stanza had pointed out that it was hopeless without some form of transportation, this only added fuel to the fire. Strider had stormed out, saying he’d find something soon enough. But he hadn’t come back. If there were no further word from him, Stanza had intended to stay inside. But after about an hour had passed, there was a knock at the shelter’s door, and a sad masculine voice drifted through the intercom. Though she couldn’t be sure it was Strider’s, she also couldn’t ignore it. When she called out and there was no response, Stanza got to her feet. Gathering her weapons, she opened the door. At that moment, she lost consciousness. She figured it was gas.

“So this is *my* fault?” the man said. “The problem is that those jerks didn’t come back. I never thought they’d just hit us with gas out of the blue.”

“Too late to cry about that now. It’s completely out of our hands. They even took our weapons away.”

“Hurry up and get this gas outta here, you bastards! If you don’t, I’ll show you some real torture!”

“You’re pretty good with the threats when there’s no one around, aren’t you? Well, you can keep your mouth shut and they’ll still be here soon enough,” Stanza told him.

“Damn it all!”

The soldiers who’d brought the two warriors there had all left, along with the guards. Apparently they had every confidence in the efficacy of that gas. Although the warriors could speak, they couldn’t move their arms or legs even slightly.

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

The eyes of both warriors turned simultaneously . . . and not toward the door. Rather, they looked to the far end of the room—a region that was sealed away in darkness. The stony chamber was filled with antiquated implements of torture: shackles dangling from the ceiling, an iron maiden with the sharp spikes within its doors laid bare, a rack covered with gears and straps for securing hands and feet, and some devices the two of them didn’t even recognize. That part of the room alone had an unsettling air about it from the first moment the warriors entered. It was as if death were crouching there in its purest form. And now, both of them felt it for certain. Something had risen at the far end of the room and was headed toward them.

Neither Strider nor Stanza knew what to say.

They were both professional warriors. They were also first class at their job. In a situation like this, they would ascertain who the enemy was, and then make plans to parley with them if necessary, or else attack them on sight if the situation warranted it.

But all of that discipline had crumbled. All desire to learn the identity of their foe or to attack had vanished. Even the fear had left them. In the face of whoever was approaching, they were no more than emotionless dolls. But who or what was it?

D halted in front of the torture chamber. Was it out of caution? No.

“Hey!” the Hunter’s left hand called out, its tone warped with surprise. “You recognize that presence?”

“Unfortunately,” D responded.

His hand gripped the knob, and he pulled the door open. Without any hesitation, he stepped right in.

In the center of the room stood a figure that was darker than the faint gloom. It was facing the Hunter.

“What’s this?” the hoarse voice said, its brow furrowing.

“D!” the shadowy figure said, rushing over.

It wasn’t Stanza. And it most certainly wasn’t Strider. Halting in front of D, it was none other than Irene.

III

“What are you doing here?” D inquired, asking the obvious question.

“I was underground . . .”

Strange soldiers had carried the girl to a subterranean chamber, and a man who identified himself as Grand Duke Dorleac’s son Drago had just kissed her when Zenon came charging in. His showdown with the Nobleman had ended in a draw. There was a high-speed transport system underground, and Zenon and Irene had gotten into one of the cars and ridden it to the end of the line. Within the castle, they’d been attacked by insectlike sentry robots and Zenon had been wounded once again, so the girl had left him to go in search of medicine.

Her account was quickly concluded.

D’s dark eyes turned toward a corner of the room as if seeking something, but apparently it wasn’t there. He quickly asked, “Where’s Zenon?”

“In an underground storeroom—number 9.”

“Go back there.”

“What about you? You’ve got to help us!”

“I still have work to do. The villagers who fled here are dead.”

All emotion drained from Irene’s face. Her eyes opened wide, and tears spilled from them. “So . . . Mom . . . and Jude . . . and Leanora . . . ? Where are they?”

“Buried. You’ll never see them again.”

Reeling, Irene put one hand against the wall to hold herself up.

“You say the damnedest things . . . don’t you? I’d already imagined it . . . but all of a sudden, it’s like somebody punched me in the gut. You know, I . . . I got

along pretty well with them all . . . well, except for my father."

Seemingly suffering from a shortness of breath, she frantically sucked in air while something glittered its way down her cheek.

"He left me behind, but I think the other three tried to stop him. And now they're all dead? Leaving just their pigheaded daughter . . . while my well-behaved little brother and sister and sweet mom . . . and, well, I couldn't care less what happened to my father."

"Go!"

The Hunter's arctic voice cut through the girl's confused psyche like the crack of a steel whip. Staring at the gorgeous visage before her as if it were something fearful, Irene said, "Okay. But if I come back empty handed, Zenon's going to die."

Without a word, D extended his left arm.

"Wait a second!" a voice called out from the palm of his hand, making Irene start.

His sword flashed out.

As Irene stood there blinking, D returned his blade to its sheath. His left arm was intact.

"Huh?" Irene exclaimed, furrowing her brow while something clung to her chest. "Your left hand?"

"That'll heal most injuries. Take it with you."

"Ahem!" Irene heard someone say, and she looked down at the lovely hand. Was that a cough?

"Take *him* with you," D said, rephrasing his earlier words before heading for the door.

He must've intended to go to Grand Duke Dorleac's resting place. However, he'd just lost his left hand. He'd have nothing to heal him if he were injured.

But where had the torture chamber's previous occupants—Strider and Stanza—vanished to? And what had become of the person whose presence the Hunter

had sensed as he'd approached?

Even now, every room and corridor was reclaiming the splendor and dignity of the Nobility's appointments. The whole place seemed to glow. A manse built from gold and marble and jewels, it was truly the residence of a Noble. There was no sign of soldiers on the upper floors. This was a place for history's chosen ones.

D advanced down a broad corridor. At the far end, an enormous door was visible. This was the resting place of the lord of the castle—Grand Duke Dorleac. Moonlight poured down from the ceiling, but it wasn't actually from the moon. Rather, the moon's glow and hue were being replicated by superadvanced lighting panels. Beneath them was darkness in human form—a young man made of darkness.

When the Hunter was still fifty yards from the door, footsteps could be heard behind him, and a voice called out, “Hey! You there!”

The speaker’s deep purple cape drifted elegantly. This was the same young man who’d identified himself as Grand Duke Dorleac’s son back in his subterranean resting place—Drago. Perhaps the Nobleman realized D wasn’t about to halt, because his face was distorted by wrath, and the right half of his cape spread like something out of a dream, forming a purple wall in front of D.

“I don’t know who you are, but when you enter someone’s house, you would

do well to acknowledge the son of the master. Are you an assassin sent by the lowly humans?"

"I suppose you could say that."

"I applaud your honesty. But you should relent. Your task is impossible with only one hand. Besides, today I shall slay my father."

"Dorleac had only one son—would your name be Drago?"

"Dear me! You're not at all like the muscle-bound clods who came through here before. So, you know my name? But—" Drago licked his unnaturally red lips. His eyes were damp with rapture. "My, you are an incredibly dashing fellow. Are you, perchance, a dhampir?"

"Yes."

"I thought as much. In that case, are you here for my father, or me?"

"For Nobles."

"Both of us? Aren't you the confident one!" Drago said, bending backward with laughter. "Of course, I just finished doing battle underground with someone who shares his body with a dead man. I underestimated him, and paid dearly for it. I won't be so lax with you. Be at ease. *I* shall be the one to slay my father."

"Why are you fighting?"

"Because my father constantly interferes."

The Hunter said nothing.

"In short, I view human beings as a malignant tumor, unfit to live. So I decided to wake the dead from their graves and make them mercenaries so that they might go out and wage war on the human scum. This was some five thousand years ago," Drago said, a distant look in his eyes. "The order and grace of the Nobility yet remained in the world. It was a good time. Every night I danced at balls, sharing my thoughts with my friends and lovely ladies. Human beings were insignificant bugs, not even worthy of discussion. However, it would seem that history is sickeningly unfair. In no time, the Nobility faded, and the lowly insects came to predominate. And so I made a weapon to deal with them and the mercenaries."

“You mean the gas that controls human beings?”

This time, it was Drago’s face that was etched with astonishment as he said, “Just a moment—who told you that? That project was conducted under the utmost secrecy. It makes a human fight a copy of himself. Just the tiniest amount of gas is enough. Is there anyone in the world who would cut himself down? While he hesitates, he’s killed by his own illusion. And that is how the world will oh so easily be returned to the hands of the Nobility. The sole drawback is that it isn’t effective on humans with powerful self-destructive urges and those who don’t identify with themselves, but that’s unavoidable.”

“And Grand Duke Dorleac opposed this?” D asked, his brain conjuring up an image of the fiend who’d sucked the life from the mercenaries. It was difficult to imagine him bothering to stop a slaughter. “Why would he stop you?”

“Apparently he had orders from *an esteemed personage*,” Baronet Drago replied, and at that moment, he backed away. D’s eyes were shining. It was enough to terrify even a soul that’d risen after more than five thousand years.

“Now I see,” the exquisite assassin said. “I see it all.”

“Really?” Now it was Baronet Drago’s turn to ask the questions. “Who in the world are you? And why would that esteemed personage interfere with me? Kindly tell me, if you know.”

“Well, that bastard was a bit unusual. Sometimes he did strange things. I don’t think even he knows whether it was for good or for ill. Not even now.”

“Hey! Did you just call him a bastard?” Drago said, true rage in his voice.

There was something that ignited the anger of any Noble when even the worst insults failed: to call the source of their race a bastard.

D’s upper body dipped. The blade that stretched from the lining of the Nobleman’s cape missed the Hunter’s neck by a hair, and D’s sword sank deep into the cape.

The face staring at D with such intensity lost all its determination at that moment.

“In my youth, I once saw a portrait of the Great One,” the baronet said, his

voice trembling and dazed. He was like a believer who'd seen God. "It can't be . . . Milord . . . It's not possible . . ."

Suddenly the cape returned to his back.

"Beyond that door is my father," he said in a weary tone. "I should like to postpone this for five minutes longer. After that, I will be only too glad to face you. Until now, I never once entertained any thoughts of possible defeat, and now that I've met you—or, to be more precise, after seeing the *Great One*, I can't help thinking that this must indeed be providence," Drago said, smiling faintly.

"Five minutes," D said.

"Oh, then you're amenable? You have my thanks. Perhaps it wasn't providence that sent you here, but part of the Great One's plan."

"Where's the gas?" D inquired.

"Underground. Should I not return, do with it as you like."

Before the figure in the purple cape, the heavy door opened, and then closed again. What was he doing in there? Perhaps this question crossed D's mind. Perhaps there was even someone who might've answered it. However, he was alone. The figure in the moonlight-showered corridor was beautiful. Far too beautiful.

WHO GETS TO GO?

CHAPTER 9

I

Once the door had shut behind Drago, calm immediately filled his heart. Had the Hunter tried to force his way inside, the baronet would've been powerless to stop him.

Surrounded by luxurious paintings, sculptures, and carpets, a white coffin sat in the center of the room, and beside it a figure in a green cape was seated in a golden chair.

"So, you've come, Drago?" said Grand Duke Dorleac, his green eyes gazing gently on his son. The arm D had taken from him was now restored. It was probably a cyborg limb.

"As you can see," the baronet replied. "Just now, I ran into someone in the hall. *The Great One*."

"Ridiculous. And yet, it's not completely out of the question. Since my castle returned to life, I've constantly felt the Great One's presence. Even five millennia later, must I still answer to *him*?"

"Indeed," said Drago, his expression one of amazement. "It was *he* who forced you to interfere with me, Father, and later made us adversaries. I don't hate you for that. However, I can't forgive the way you handed over Mother, no matter how grand the cause."

"Those were my orders."

"Mother never did return, and rumor has it she was used in experiments any Noble would find abhorrent."

"Enough!"

“You may act as wounded as you like now, but that won’t bring her back! For the sake of my mother, who died in pain and humiliation, I shall slay my father, and then lay waste to the world of man.”

“That runs contrary to *his* will. I’ll stop you, Drago!”

“I fully expect you to try. One other thing, Father,” Drago said, turning his head ever so slightly toward the corridor. “What I encountered wasn’t an illusion. Nor was it merely *his* presence.”

“What?”

That stunned instant was precisely what the Nobleman’s son had been waiting for. The grand duke was suddenly enveloped by purple, and the blades that thrust out from all sides pierced his body. Reaching out his hands, the grand duke tried to catch hold of his son. As his arms were sliced off at the elbow and fell to the floor, Dorleac shuddered from head to toe, coughing up bright blood.

“That was quicker than I expected, Father,” Drago said, smiling sadly. “You gave Mother as an offering to the Great One. And *he* sided with the filthy humans. I want you to understand why I did these things.”

The baronet’s cape opened and returned to its normal shape, while the grand duke’s body collapsed to the floor as if it’d been waiting to do so all along.

Baronet Drago was headed for the door when he halted and turned, saying, “Next, I shall do battle with the Great One. Here’s hoping we meet again in the hereafter at some point. I suspect we’re both going to the same place.”

Heading toward the door again, he turned for a second time.

A green globe had glided into the air.

“Not through yet?” Drago said, meeting the threat head on.

The globe closed on him.

The purple cape spread like gigantic wings.

The sound of the great door opening echoed down the corridor. D gazed at the figure revealed by the moonlight.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” the young Nobleman told him.

D’s right hand went for the hilt of his sword. He didn’t inquire how the battle with Dorleac had turned out. The only thing he had to offer the man who’d returned as promised was the fight they’d agreed upon.

Drago spread his cape as if there was nothing that could’ve pleased him more.

“There’s one thing you should know,” the baronet said, purple chaos whirling behind him. “Even if you should slay me in this battle, the mercenaries won’t be destroyed. Each side will fight to the last man, spreading slaughter across the entirety of the Frontier. And no one can stop that.” A smile split his lips, revealing glittering white fangs. “He was a great father.”

D dashed through the moonlight. As he barreled through it, the glittering moonlight changed shape and watched him go, at times like a fog, at times like mica.

A wall of purple met D’s blade. Making a horizontal slash, D poised himself for a thrust. Stark streaks of light flew to the Hunter’s left and to his right, in front of him and behind him. Parrying some and dodging others, D made his thrust. Drago’s heart would lie at the end of it.

The Hunter felt his blade pierce fabric. Drago’s cape was folded, layer upon layer, making a wall to ward off the blow.

“Can you see me?” Drago inquired.

D’s entire field of view was filled by writhing purple fabric.

“I see you.”

“What?” the frozen Nobleman exclaimed, and at the zenith of his astonishment, D bounded. The wall of purple spread before him, and a naked blade shot from it. Not bothering to parry it, D swung his sword home. He could feel only too well as it split his foe’s skull.

As it came drifting down, the purple wall dissolved into the moonlight. The tall figure reeled, like a dancer thrown off balance.

“Well done! I should expect no less from the Great One.”

As he watched the bright blood swiftly soaking his opponent’s face and chest,

D said something strange: “That wasn’t my sword.”

As if yanked backward on a line, Drago tumbled against the great door, using it to pull himself upright. His cape sailed up. Beneath it, his chest was gone. In its place, there was a hole the size of his head. The carvings on the great door behind him were visible through the gap. Grand Duke Dorleac’s ball of energy had dealt a critical wound.

The light was swiftly fading from the baronet’s eyes. Reaching out one hand as if seeking something, he said, “Please . . . give me back my mother.”

And with that he collapsed. By the time he hit the floor, he was half dust. It streamed through the blue light like an ashen fog. There must have been a breeze.

As D gazed at the dust, weariness clung to his features like a shadow.

“So, I look like *him*?” the Hunter said, but it was unclear if the words were intended for the departed or someone else.

D’s gaze fell on the great door. His sword was in his right hand. And the doorway was producing another shadowy figure.

“So, you *are* here, are you?” Grand Duke Dorleac said with a certain heartfelt emotion. Not a drop of blood remained on the body that’d been so badly perforated. “I sensed something out on the battlefield. Are you the esteemed personage of whom my son spoke?”

“Your son is gone. What will you do?”

“I rose from the dead to guard against my son’s actions. I no longer have any business in this world.”

The Hunter said nothing.

The grand duke’s vermilion lips formed a smile, bringing white fangs into view.

“But being a Noble, there’s something I must do: rule over the humans.”

“Were those your Sacred Ancestor’s orders?”

“No, the Sacred Ancestor forbade even threatening the humans. What I shall do next will run contrary to his lofty intentions.”

“So, you’ve come to pity your son?”

The grand duke’s eyes were ablaze. A fiery ball of death shot from his mouth, streaking toward D. The arc of the Hunter’s sword split it in two. Simultaneously an explosion occurred, and D was physically blown back.

“It’s not just human energy. Didn’t you see my mobile collector that takes in all kinds of life?”

Blue waves of electromagnetism enveloped D’s chest. Or rather, they were chaotic flames of life energy.

Narrowing his eyes, the grand duke looked at D. “Oh, that’s right. You’re injured, aren’t you? It would appear my son took a toll on you.” The Nobleman then donned an expression as if he’d suddenly realized something, continuing, “Ah, but your skill should be far beyond my son’s. I see. You let him do that on purpose, didn’t you?”

D’s knees shook. The grand duke’s attack seemed to be scorching him to the very marrow, and the left hand that could’ve negated it wasn’t there to help him.

“As his parent, I should probably thank you for that, but of course you’re no more than a filthy bounty hunter out to take our lives. I must dismiss my son’s words as mere misgivings before battle.”

The Nobleman’s mouth opened, revealing a deep green glow.

D had his sword at the ready, too. Despite the hopeless agony he was in, he hadn’t lost a whit of his will to fight. The Hunter kicked off the ground.

His features forming a grin that was the picture of malevolence, the grand duke launched the flaming sphere of death at D’s chest. Leaving his still-flaming body exposed to the swelling sphere of fire, D hurled his longsword as if it were a throwing knife.

The grand duke had plenty of time. He launched a second flaming sphere at the blade. The flames welled up, forming an immovable shield.

Piercing this shield, the sword sank into the chest of the still-smiling grand duke. As his body snapped back, he screamed out a death rattle.

“Wh—what strength is this?” Dorleac sputtered. “It can’t be. Tell me it’s not you . . . milord . . .”

His words were heard by the blazing figure in black. The flames then vanished like water seeping into the ground as D’s body absorbed them. A ferocious glow resided in the Hunter’s dark eyes.

“You . . . drank blood . . .”

D’s lips were damp with crimson. Just before hurling his longsword, he’d bitten open the inside of his mouth and drunk the blood. That was why his sword had pierced the deadly fireball.

“But I’m not destroyed yet . . . The power that flows through me is that of the Sacred Ancestor.”

“Why did the Sacred Ancestor bring the two of you back to life?” D asked as black smoke rose from his chest, cuffs, and back.

“Five thousand years ago . . . when my son and I did battle and we both were slain, the Sacred Ancestor was battling a group of Nobles who’d started an insurrection. They had taken my son in and promised to revive him after his death, so he might paint the human world pitch black five millennia later. Learning of this, the Sacred Ancestor told me he would resurrect me at the same time, and ordered me to put an end to my son. You see, I was told that I was responsible for my son’s rebellion.”

“And that meant the two of you had to cross swords again?”

“Enough talk. Face me once more, you who have the power of the Sacred Ancestor!”

Twisting his upper body, Grand Duke Dorleac started to rush forward, the sword still stuck in him. But ahead, a man and a woman appeared from the great corridor to the right. It was Stanza and Strider, the same two warriors who’d been exposed to the unearthly gas that lingered in the torture chamber. While it was unclear where they’d been or what they’d been doing, they wore the expressions of those who gaze upon nothingness.

“Your job is finished, grand duke!” said Strider. It was Strider’s voice, but that’s not who was there. “No other action is called for. Return to the darkness from

which the Great One brought you.”

The grand duke laughed, his voice dripping with blood. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. I realize something only now. My son was correct. Crushing the humans underfoot and savoring their blood is the only way for a Noble to live! I intend to follow through on my son’s wishes.”

Perhaps it was the same will that’d allowed him to destroy his own son that made the grand duke gnash his fangs, his rather contemplative visage flushing with an undirected rage. He unleashed a fireball like he was spitting up a gout of blood.

A split second before it could sink into Strider’s forehead, a silver blade appeared to intercept it, with the ball sizzling away like a drop of water on a hot skillet. Lowering the sword he’d held out horizontally, Strider grinned. It was the smile of someone who’d been given unearthly power.

As the grand duke stood rooted like a statue, the warrior charged toward him, the wind swirling in his wake. When Strider was ten paces away, the grand duke’s right hand went for the hilt of the longsword protruding from his chest. The blade was pulled out and hurled in a single motion, but Strider batted it away with ease. It must’ve seemed to him like a feeble act of desperation—but then a ball of fire struck the warrior’s chest. It was a mass of energy that’d been spat out just after D’s sword was thrown. Strider hadn’t noticed that the sword was merely a ruse to camouflage this second attack.

Not even glancing at the warrior he’d transformed into a fiery mass, the grand duke dashed down the corridor. After him ran Strider, trailing flames and black smoke.

“There’s no keeping that man down, is there?” Stanza sneered, watching her compatriot go as if none of this had any bearing on her.

II

“How long are they going to play hide-and-seek? We’re not the same anymore, you know.”

“You’ve been possessed, haven’t you?” said D.

Tapping a finger against her head, Stanza replied, “Oh, you can tell? There was someone strange back in the torture chamber. Well, not a *person*, but a kind of presence. I think it was probably left here to wait for this day. For five thousand years.”

D took a step forward.

“Aren’t you still full of fight! Where are you going?”

“My job’s not finished yet.”

“Strider will finish him off. And you’ll have to deal with me,” Stanza said, her right hand slipping into her jacket.

D halted.

“Oh, you finally feel like doing this? Unfortunately, I’m not the same me you used to know.”

“*He* possesses a woman—and it seems she wants me to consider her *him*,” the Hunter mused.

“If I didn’t, you’d never fight me. You know, I’m so happy. I finally get to face you as an equal.”

Stanza’s right hand flashed out. The old Stanza always twisted to the left a split second before she hurled darts with her right hand—it was the stance she took to throw them—but now she skipped that movement, hurling her darts as soon as she pulled them out. She no longer had a need for that once-crucial movement.

And D had no longsword to fend off her darts. With dull thuds, her iron projectiles sank into his flesh—into the left arm D was holding over his face.

Though Stanza saw a streak of black light zipping toward her, she couldn’t do anything to stop it. Taking D’s dagger deep in the left side of her chest, she leapt away some ten feet, and then fell to the floor.

D calmly walked over to where his longsword lay on the floor and picked it up.

Stanza was now standing up ahead. She had her right arm raised for a throw.

“How can this be? The way I am now . . . I thought I’d be able to take you . . . But you’re not the same, either . . . are you?” she said, taking odd, dancelike steps as she backed away. The darts fell from her right hand, and then her arm came down as well. As if chasing the echoes of the metallic projectiles hitting the floor, Stanza fell on her side.

As D stood stock still, her final words flowed into his ears.

“But you’re the same . . . as I am . . . now.”

And now that she’d breathed her last, he raced past her with sword in hand, a black whirlwind.

Grand Duke Dorleac’s destination was the chemical research facility that’d been constructed underground. The sole fruit of his labors remained there: a tightly sealed golden tank filled with gas. The grand duke’s intent was nothing short of opening the valve and letting the gas spread over the world.

An egregious weakness assailed the Nobleman. The blood loss was affecting his internal organs. Though he somehow managed to muster his will, he couldn’t contain the chaos ravaging his body. The problem wasn’t the wound the sword had dealt him, but rather the power that’d poured into him with it. Just as Drago had said, the young man who called himself D was truly a fiend.

A crushing weight of chills rolled through him from head to toe. Desperately fighting them off, Dorleac took a seat in the control room and said, “It is I. Prepare to release the gas.”

A computerized voice replied, “I cannot comply at present. You will be notified after I’ve run a comparison.”

“Preposterous! I am the master of this house! What kind of comparison do you mean?”

“Baronet Drago alone is authorized for activities involving the gas. All other data has been purged. Only Baronet Drago himself or a blood relative of his may give the command.”

“Drago,” the grand duke began to say, gritting his teeth, “you fool! I’m trying

to fulfill your wishes. Run that comparison, and be quick about it!" he shouted back at the voice.

"Very well," was the response. In two different voices.

Turning, the grand duke found a figure standing before the door with a longsword in hand. However, that alone wouldn't suffice to make a Noble show this much surprise.

"Are you human? No, I think not—"

"They call me Zenon. I'm a robber by trade. I spotted you as I was wandering down here."

This couldn't be. A Noble's senses never failed to detect a person's footsteps, their breathing, their very presence. Not if it were a human.

"Nobles are the living dead—and therefore they trump the living. But I wonder how they fare against the dead."

Despair gripped the grand duke. Even a nearly mortally wounded Noble could knock a mere human opponent flat with one hand. However, this opponent was another matter. A thought suddenly flitted through Dorleac's mind. *The living dead aren't better than the living because they're not truly alive. They aren't better than the dead because they're not truly dead.*

Who'd he hear say that?

A fireball assailed his foe. His arms were up, holding his sword by the side of his head like a bat, but when the fiery sphere scored a direct hit over his heart, it didn't spread, but rather it vanished. The grand duke was just about to move when Zenon swung his sword at the Nobleman's neck. At the same moment, Dorleac's finger pressed a tiny button. There was a good fifteen feet between them. The blade sliced air—but the grand duke's neck was also cut. As bright blood gushed from Dorleac, Zenon charged toward him, making a precise thrust at his foe's heart with his steel.

Sheathing his blade again without a word, the outlaw was just walking out the door when the grand duke's severed head heard the computer say, "The comparison is complete. Now beginning preparations to release the gas."

The preparations were also completed. But those who might've given the order to release it were gone forever.

A strange change took place in and around the castle. The number of troops had swelled dramatically, causing small skirmishes and frequently lopsided battles, but once a certain button had been pressed, all of this ceased. The second act Grand Duke Dorleac had lined up to follow the massacre by gas had succeeded. All the soldiers lost any sense of "rivalry" they'd had, leaving their brains filled with the thoughts *mobilize* and *slaughter*. And those two thoughts were strongly linked to a third thought: *humans*.

As Zenon made his way down the corridor, there was the sound of light footfalls growing closer. The lithe form didn't attempt to hide, but rather launched itself at his chest with evident delight.

"So, you're okay? I'm so glad!" Irene told him, and although anyone could be expected to say such a thing at a time like this, there was genuine emotion behind her words.

Zenon clumsily wrapped his arms around the girl's back.

"What's the deal with that hand?"

Before Irene could reply, the palm of the left hand appeared from the neck of her blouse, saying, "Hey, there!"

Zenon grinned. There was almost something wry about his smile. "Looks like a fun place to be," he said.

"It's the perfect place to hide," the hand replied brazenly. It was wedged right between her sizable breasts.

"I slew the Noble. You should probably thank me, you know."

There was a pause, after which the left hand asked, "You're the sane one, right?"

"Don't worry. He disappeared after slaying the Noble. Seems he put his whole heart and soul into it."

“How do you know he slew him? You’re not supposed to have his memories, right?”

“After putting down the Noble, he was just leaving the room when I came back.”

“Hmm—so, how are you doing?”

“I’ll manage, thanks,” Zenon replied, nodding as he put his hand against his chest.

“Hmph! You’re lucky to have survived this long. Try your best not to blow it now.”

“Okay,” the outlaw replied.

A look of joy suffused Irene’s face.

It was at that moment that a dull shock reverberated through the ceiling.

“Ah, what’s this?” the left hand said, turning upward.

“An explosion?” Irene suggested, her brow furrowed.

Zenon shook his head, saying, “No, something came down. Really close, too.”

The three of them exchanged glances, and then headed for the great staircase they could see in the distance.

In less than three hours’ time, Beatrice had achieved satisfactory results. He never did learn where the treasure vault was, but the Nobles’ living rooms and parlors, libraries, and kitchens were all brimming with valuables. The candelabras and ashtrays he found were made of gold, and gem-encrusted knickknacks had been left all over the place. With all the wealth they could ever desire, the Nobility had grown weary of riches, and having no particular interest in them, they didn’t worry that anything might be stolen. Cramming things with one hand into a sack he’d brought along, the giant had finally reached the limit of what he could carry before he was able to convince himself to stop. Though it pained him to think of the victims they’d seen earlier, Beatrice told himself that swiping the Nobles’ property would help even the score.

He didn’t have to worry about making his escape. His notes stated that a single flying machine remained in a hangar out in the rear garden. Being one of the Nobility’s vehicles, it didn’t require a dedicated pilot. Voice commands would suffice. When he’d tried to get it going, the engine had started. Beatrice intended to fly it out of there. The flying machine was waiting even now.

Deciding to pull out, the giant was just leaving one of the living rooms when a terrible jolt reached him. Peering out the window, he saw a kind of airship burning in a corner of the grand garden, which could’ve passed for a city park. The craft was less than five hundred yards away.

“What the hell is this?” Beatrice said, setting down the sack he’d had over his shoulder and staring at the airship intently.

Leaving the loot there in decisive fashion, he headed for the door to the garden.

Next to enter the garden was D. A number of figures were approaching from the direction of the flames. In the lead was a familiar bearded face. He had one child on his back, and another in each arm. A little girl had her arms wrapped around his neck. Behind him was a boy who seemed slightly older than the others, and he too carried one child on his back while leading two others by the hand. Lagging in the rear was a uniformed figure who appeared to be the pilot, dragging one leg behind him. Before D could walk over to them, the group reached him.

“What the hell were you jokers doing?” Beatrice shouted.

The gigantic warrior didn’t seem winded, but the boy beside him set the girl down, braced his hands against the ground, and began gasping for air. His face looked familiar. It was the same boy Beatrice couldn’t take his eyes off back at the orphanage they’d visited at the beginning of the trip—Franco Gilbey.

III

Led by Beatrice, the group was ushered to the castle’s infirmary—although it would’ve been better to term it a full-scale hospital. The children mostly suffered from minor cuts and scrapes, and while the pilot had sustained burns to his face and the backs of his hands, he was in no danger of dying. Beatrice had learned that the teacher accompanying the children had been killed in the crash.

Just as the pilot was explaining how they’d been flying over the castle when the engines suddenly burst into flames, the sobs of the children who finally seemed to have recovered from their shock began to echo through the vast chamber.

“We’ve got real trouble now,” Beatrice said, and he meant two things. The first was the fact that supernatural soldiers were swarming outside. The second was that the flying machine could carry only five adults, or twice that many children. Either he or D was going to have to stay behind.

“There’s another way out,” D replied, his words cheering Beatrice greatly. D was referring to the passage that’d brought Irene and Zenon there. While they didn’t know how far it ran, it had to be better than remaining in the castle.

“That’s perfect,” said the gigantic warrior. “You should’ve told me about that in the first place!”

Just then, the building trembled once again with a dull vibration. This time it came from underground.

Turning to D, Beatrice said, “I have a really bad feeling about this.”

“Leave it to me,” D said, exiting the infirmary. Due perhaps to his dhampir blood, the wounds in his left arm had already healed halfway.

As D walked down the corridor, he saw changes in the castle around him. Dust billowed across the marble floors, the walls and ceilings decayed, and the terribly peeled paintings fell to the floor. The curtains were also on the floor, now reduced to dust. With the death of its two masters, the castle's fleeting life was at an end—except for the malevolent will that resided in the subterranean computer room.

Starting down the stairs toward the underground passageway Irene had mentioned, the Hunter heard two pairs of footsteps galloping up from below. It was Irene, and behind her was Zenon.

"D!" Irene said, relief spreading across her face.

"The enemy?" D asked, having a good idea what'd happened.

Irene and Zenon nodded, while the hoarse voice replied, "Soldiers were coming up through the basement, so we had to blow it. You gotta love the Nobles' castles. The place was rigged with explosives as part of its defenses."

"This is no time for being smug," Zenon said with disgust. "We can't use that escape route anymore. By the way, the soldiers who came pouring in were a mixed band."

"So, the two armies have joined forces?" asked the Hunter.

"Looks that way. The *other* me would probably know more about that. He slew Grand Duke Dorleac, but the Noble might've changed something before he died."

"Where was the fight?" D asked Zenon.

"In some sort of research center down below."

"How do you get there?"

"Go all the way down and take a right. Then it's a left, and another left."

"Take these two to the infirmary," D said, his words directed toward Irene's chest.

"Roger that!"

Without even waiting for that hoarse reply, D started down the broad

staircase.

“I wonder if he’ll be okay,” Irene murmured dreamily, pressing her hand to her heart as her cheeks flushed.

“Let’s get going,” Zenon told her.

The Hunter soon found the research center. The automatic door didn’t open. The castle was already dead, and its power was cut off.

“So, that’s twice it’s died?” D murmured, but no one was there to reply.

A glint of moonlight seemed trapped in the blade of the Hunter’s sword. Hauling back his right arm, D gazed at the door—at the line where it met the wall, to be precise. Unleashed without a word, the streak of light slipped into that impossibly narrow gap. His sword buried halfway in the crack, D put all his weight behind it as he shoved to the right. His right arm seemed to bulge with the effort. But the door was slowly opening. Once it was open far enough for him to fit his hand in, D returned his longsword to its sheath and stepped closer to the door.

At that point he halted and turned around. In the distance, he saw Zenon coming down the corridor. Nevertheless, D put his right hand against the door and applied pressure.

A shot rang out. The bullet that struck the edge of the door ricocheted off without even scratching its surface.

D turned around.

Zenon drew his sword.

“Looks like that time has come, D.”

Saying nothing, D drew his own blade. This wasn’t the same simple fighting man he’d seen upstairs. This was a homicidal fiend out for blood. He wasn’t even human.

Madness and an unearthly air coalesced in the darkness. There was the sound of someone running toward them. D’s eyes reflected Irene. And while his attention was ever so briefly diverted, Zenon’s blade flashed into action.

Narrowly managing to dash to the right, the figure in black's right leg dripped bright blood as he dropped to one knee.

"Zenon, don't!" Irene cried, her mouth open as far as it could go in her sweat-covered face.

"You were warned not to come," the Zenon who wasn't Zenon muttered, jabbing his sword straight behind him.

Even after dark blood gushed from her neck, Irene ran another five paces.

"Please . . . stop it . . ."

As her body fell, it sent so much blood out across the floor one had to wonder where it'd all come from.

Zenon didn't even glance at her. He was looking at D, in accordance with the rules of combat.

"Stupid woman," the outlaw said in a tone devoid of even an iota of sympathy for the girl at his feet. "She came here to protect you. Not that it would've done any good."

"You're right," D replied. "Except the girl came here to protect *you*. And that wouldn't have done any good."

Zenon's features twisted with madness, and he took the blade he had pointed straight at D and swung it toward the Hunter's neck. But there was still fifteen feet between them.

D's blade parried the blow. Unconsciously, Zenon laughed in his heart. His unseen blade wasn't a physical attack: it was literally deadly intent that he unleashed. It would shatter even the best-forged sword.

No sooner did Zenon feel the blow being stopped than he saw D flying through the air, wearing the face of a Noble with his own blood on his lips. The horrifying face of a vampire. Forgetting to even counter, he stood there like a scarecrow as D's sword sliced cleanly through him from the top of his head all the way down to his crotch.

As the Hunter fell to one knee between the halves of the bisected body, he heard a voice say, "Thank you . . . I go to my rest . . . as *myself*."

It was Zenon's voice. But *which* Zenon, no one could say.

"Am I too late?" the hoarse voice said in a vexed tone from D's feet. It was pointing toward Irene's corpse. "All of a sudden, that bastard Zenon nailed me to the floor with a dagger, and it was a pain in the ass getting free again. I told the girl not to go, you know."

Saying nothing, D took Irene's hands and folded them across her chest.

"While I was patching up Zenon, she was busy as a beaver helping me. Zenon was pretty brusque—but I think there was some empathy there, eh?"

Not replying, D turned toward the door to the research center. Off to the left, there was a commotion and the sound of countless feet coming like a mudslide.

Now reattached to the stump, D's left hand said, "Did those clowns get the underground passageway open? Look out!"

Something was rolling from the same direction as the footsteps. A silver cylinder—and the instant D saw it, he dashed for the door. The blast and flames slammed him against the door. Though both the explosion and its flames still continued to spread, a heartbeat later they immediately shrank into a tight funnel, streaming into a tiny mouth.

"When I was taking care of Zenon, I drank the water in the storeroom," said the hoarse voice. "Just now I got a belly full of fire and air. Fire, water, earth, and air—I guess I'll have to do without the earth."

D reached for the door. Though it weighed several tons, it glided open. Beneath that black raiment was a body imbued with inhuman strength.

Once the Hunter entered the room, his eyes gave off blood light as they focused on a certain point. The blue light that indicated activity in the machinery was flickering. That was the work of the button Dorleac had pressed as his final act.

"Here we go," said the Hunter.

"Sure."

D dashed over to the control panel, pressing his left hand to it above the light. A pale blue glow formed around his hand, and then flames spouted from the

control panel.

“That takes care of that!”

As the hoarse voice spoke, D spun around. Figures were pouring through the doorway like smoke. There was a roar like thunder and gunshots, and crimson beams pierced D’s body.

The Hunter carved his way through the shadowy figures. Flesh was sliced, and bone was split. Blood sprayed without end. But no matter what it touched, the blade’s speed never changed. One after another the soldiers fell, and as they did, D steadily made his way back to the corridor that’d brought him there.

On reaching the door, the hoarse voice groaned, “What the hell?”

The vast corridor was packed with green and gray. Even for D, getting through them would be impossible—nearly. It would still take an extremely long time.

“Why haven’t they died? Was that Dorleac’s command?”

“Maybe we were mistaken. This could take a while,” the Hunter said, the icy sweetness of his voice not the least bit shaken.

“That machine was a lousy piece of junk!” D’s left hand groused, and as if stirred by its anger, the soldiers charged forward.

IV

“Are we in danger? When our ship was coming down, I could see from up there that some weird characters had the whole castle surrounded. What in the blue blazes is going on here?” the pilot asked, his voice quavering.

Finally turning both his attention and his gaze in the man’s direction, Beatrice said, “Stop your yammering. Act like a man and quit blubbering, or I swear I’ll slit your throat long before those clowns get a chance to. Look at that kid. He’s holding together about a thousand times better than you are.”

This was the same Hunter of Nobility who’d once left Stanza in awe. There was an intensity about him that cowed the pilot into silence.

Beatrice returned his gaze to the boy—Franco Gilbey. The boy was looking after the younger children, cheering them up and giving them someone to talk to. He was the ideal head of the group—both a leader and a friend. Their childish instincts picked up on the disquieting atmosphere, and though the children had been reassured time and again, they kept asking if they were going to be okay and if they'd make it back. But Franco never got cross, always telling them they'd be going soon and that they should just trust him. He even turned in Beatrice's direction, saying, "I mean, doesn't that guy look really tough? We'll be fine, because we've got him on our side."

That really struck a nerve with Beatrice, making him rather sheepish.

"Kid, how old are you?" Beatrice asked as he cautiously gazed out the window. About thirty minutes had passed since D had left.

"Thirteen," the boy said, his reply as brisk as his movements.

"Is that a fact? You sure are a handsome cuss. I bet the girls go crazy over you, don't they?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. So, what about you girls? Who'd like to be married to him?"

"Me! Me!" all four girls chanted, causing Beatrice to bug his eyes, then clutch his belly as he laughed.

"See, you're gonna be a regular home wrecker when you grow up."

"Huh?"

Beatrice hurriedly amended that, saying, "I mean, a real lady-killer. At any rate, be sure to give 'em hell."

"Yes, sir," the boy replied, with a look that said, *Just who is this guy?*

Coughing, Beatrice asked, "So, er, do you remember what kind of guy your father was?"

"Not at all," the boy replied flatly.

"Really? How about your mother?"

Looking down, the boy quickly said, "I don't remember anything about her,

either.”

“Oh, sorry I brought it up. I bet your mother was a real beauty. But your father was probably scum.”

“How do you know that?” Franco asked with sudden indignation. “How do *you* know my father was scum? You don’t even know him.”

“No, son—er, I mean, kid. But we’re talking about a guy who abandoned a great kid like you.”

“How do you know it was my father that gave me up? Maybe it was someone else.”

“Yeah, you have a point there,” Beatrice said, backpedaling. He couldn’t help but smile a little. “Well, then, what kind of guy do you think your father was?”

“A great one.”

“Really?”

“A man who was strong and kind. That’s all that matters. I don’t know anything about my father, but I think he must have been like that.”

“I see,” Beatrice said, folding his arms and shutting his eyes as he nodded pensively. Turning his back to the boy, he continued, “Yeah, I’m sure you’re right. Your father must’ve been a man among men.”

“Franco, I gotta pee!” one of the boys called out, and Franco ran over to him.

It was just then that a strange presence moved beyond the window. A great swarm of mercenaries was surging over the wall at the far end of the garden.

“Everybody, outside! Just stick with Uncle Beatrice!” the warrior shouted, giving the pilot, who was about to faint dead away, a kick in the ass before taking two children by the hand, putting one on his back and having the other cling to his neck.

When they got into the corridor, there were a pair of figures running toward them from the far end. It was D—carrying the lifeless Irene—and Strider.

On seeing the girl, the giant let out a sigh, then glared at Strider and asked, “What the hell took you so long?”

“Got stuck in a maze the grand duke set up to foil intruders. It wasn’t easy getting out again.”

“Sheesh, you’re a complete idiot, aren’t you?” he spat.

“It was thanks to him we were able to get away,” D told the giant.

“Really?”

D didn’t bother to explain that a single roar from Strider while in the thick of the enemy army had allowed them to make their escape. Like Stanza, the warrior had an unearthly air about him that’d left hundreds of soldiers paralyzed.

Beatrice could only take the Hunter at his word, saying, “You don’t say. What about that passage down there?”

“It’s no good,” D replied.

“Then I guess we’re out of options. Follow me,” Beatrice said with resolve, spinning around.

The iron door was shut. D put his shoulder up against it. The iron panel had to weigh several tons. When they saw it glide back, Beatrice and the children could only stare in wonder.

Inside, an egg-shaped craft rested on a launch pad.

“What’s your status?” Beatrice inquired.

“All systems normal,” an electronically synthesized voice replied. Stiffening at the sound of it, the children began to cry en masse. It sounded to them like some sort of hobgoblin.

“What are you, an idiot?” the hoarse voice spat at Beatrice.

Though Beatrice glared at D, he quickly turned toward the robotic voice and said in a surly tone, “You got the power to open the launch bay, don’t you?”

“That will be no problem.”

“Look, this thing seats five adults. For kids, it’ll fit twice that many. So in addition to the little ones, there’s room for one adult. We’ve gotta decide who that’ll be.”

“M—me! I’m a pilot, after all!”

Staring coolly at the sputtering man, Beatrice posed a question—not to the pilot, but rather to the flying machine.

“If someone gives you a destination, can you go there without a pilot at the controls?”

“That poses no problem.”

Laughing, the bearded warrior said, “Well, we’re all equal, then. How are we gonna decide?”

Beyond the door, there was the sound of countless people moving around. The soldiers had arrived.

“Better make this fast. First off, who’s staying? Me!” Beatrice said, raising one hand and taking a step back. “The rest of you, settle it between yourselves.”

Franco’s eyes fairly bored through Beatrice as he gazed at the gigantic warrior. If he stayed there, there was no way he could survive.

“Well, what are we gonna do?” Strider said, shrugging his shoulders and staring at D. “You know, I’d like to save everybody. How about we draw straws?”

“Shut the hell up!” the pilot shouted. He was aiming an automatic pistol he’d had stashed in his clothes. He probably carried it for self-defense. “You’re all combat professionals, right? In that case, you stay. I’ll take the brats out of here!”

The pilot’s bloodshot eyes had narrowed sharply and spittle collected at the corners of his lips, making him the very picture of a maniac.

“Okay, okay,” Strider said, nodding. “You know, buddy, that makes one less person we have to worry about.”

There was a thud against the body of the aircraft.

As the pilot was momentarily distracted, a silvery flash zipped to his throat.

“Don’t let the kids see!” Beatrice cried out.

“Yeah, yeah, I hear you,” replied Strider, who’d banged on the aircraft. Stepping closer to the paralyzed pilot, he grabbed him from behind, pressing

down just above the Adam's apple. The warrior quickly brought the man back behind a row of storage tanks, but returned alone.

"Which one of you is it gonna be? You've gotta decide," Beatrice said, but his words were drowned in the children's screams. Turning to see what they were looking at, he did a double take.

The door was red hot. Heat rays were being blasted against it from outside.

"That won't last another five minutes—open the launch bay. Okay, all aboard now!" As Franco stood by the door, helping to get the children into their seats, the giant urged him, "Hurry it up!"

"Mister?"

"Yeah?"

"You're really great!" the boy said, looking directly at the former Hunter. There wasn't a man alive who wouldn't want to be looked at that way.

"How so?" Beatrice said, forcing a frown. He was trying to mask his embarrassment.

"I wanna be like you when I grow up, sir. I'm sure my father was like you, too."

"Yeah, I'm sure he was," Beatrice said, slapping a meaty hand down on the boy's shoulder. He was still skin and bones. But in another five years, he'd have a build to rival that of his father. "I bet your dad was a great man, too. After all, he had a part in bringing you into this world. You know, if I ever had a kid of my own, there was something I always wanted to tell him. But I never have gotten that chance."

"What is it? Tell me," Franco said, his eyes glistening.

"No, that's okay. You don't need to hear it. It's like someone already said it to you a long, long time ago."

"Tell me."

Saying nothing, Beatrice rubbed the boy's head. Finally, he told the boy, "Grow up to be a strong, kind man, okay?"

"Yes, sir," the boy said, his face glowing. For that was how he'd lived. And that

was how he'd continue to live.

"Mister?" Franco said, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "Mister, you wouldn't happen to be—"

"You can't be serious!" the giant exclaimed, his mouth stretched wide. "Someone like me, being your—? That's ridiculous, isn't it, D?"

"That's right," D said, gazing at the pair. He was like a gorgeous ice sculpture. And his voice was equally cold. "He's got a thing for loose women. He's a gold digger. He can't see a woman without trying to chat her up—he's the lowest of the low."

"Now, that's just plain uncalled for!" the wide-eyed Beatrice protested.

Ignoring him, D continued, "But now he's going to stay here with me and fight an army. That's all you need to remember."

"Hey!" Beatrice said, eyes wide.

The boy was staring at D. It was the same look he'd given Beatrice.

And then the giant noticed something. As tears streamed down the boy's face, it glowed.

A smile graced D's lips. Through all the hardships the boy would endure in the ensuing years, he would think back, and the memory of how he'd put that smile there would keep him on course. It was just such a smile.

"That settles it," D said to Strider.

"Come on! I can't let you two have all the glory. I'm staying, too."

"Are you serious?" D asked.

"Well, on second thought, I wouldn't feel right sending those kids out all alone. So I guess I'll be taking you up on that kind offer!"

"That's for the best," Beatrice said, reaching for the door. "Okay, get going. See you around, everybody!"

Strider got on board, and Franco took a seat.

“To the Capital,” the boy told the machine. The last thing he saw was the two men looking up at him and smiling.

Franco never heard from them again. While he was studying the history of the Nobility at the Capital, he heard that an investigative unit sent by the government to research the highway had entered the castle and found countless withered corpses there, but it was unclear if they’d died in battle or if their time had merely run out.

At the age of seventeen, Franco graduated from a specialized high school with highest honors and was accepted to a university of history on a full scholarship. That day, his homeroom teacher called him aside and handed him a bank book. The teacher explained that ever since the boy had come to the school, deposits had continually been made in his name.

“But you didn’t need it. You traveled the path to higher learning all on your own. So, what’ll you do with this?”

The boy replied that the school should use it to help the underclassmen.

As white petals rained down on graduation day, Franco stepped through the school’s gates and was instantly congratulated by teachers and friends who’d come to see him from the orphanage. In the midst of the throng, the boy suddenly turned his eyes toward the school building. At the north end of the grounds there stood a beech tree. Beneath it, he saw something. A man in black astride a white steed, and a hirsute man leaning against a black horse. The boy remembered them. He hadn’t forgotten the pair for a single moment. Taking a deep breath, he was about to walk toward them when the two riders wheeled their respective mounts and galloped off into the white petals.

END

POSTSCRIPT

The *Vampire Hunter D* series is based on gothic horror, science fiction, and westerns. Since I was a child, I've always been more in tune with movies than novels. Unlike the present, when special-effects-laden films are released nearly every week, it was westerns both old and new that I consistently found most pleasing.

Based on my writing, one might think I watch mainly horror and science fiction films, but I've actually seen far more westerns. And unlike horror or science fiction, quite a lot has been written about westerns, with their basis in historical fact. Through my reading, I've learned about not only westerns, but also the history of the westward expansion and various related phenomena. These films include *Stagecoach*, *My Darling Clementine*, *Shane*, *The Law and Jack Wade*, *The Alamo*, *The Magnificent Seven*, *Rio Bravo*, *Winchester '73*, *Warlock*, and many, many more. I was just a child when I first saw them, but the protagonists of these films showed me how severe life could be for those living on the harsh frontier, and how firm their resolve was. Of course, that did little more than make me strap on a toy holster and six-shooter and practice my quick draw. (*laughs*) At some point, the western declined for reasons unknown, and when filmmakers tried the occasional revival, the cast and stories were always hopelessly flashy, so the genre never did make a complete recovery. At the very least, it was my wish to put some of what I found so fascinating about those old films into the *Vampire Hunter D* series. The speed and skill with which D draws his blade is reminiscent of the quick-drawing gunmen of the westerns. You should be able to clearly discern the influence of westerns in *Mercenary Road*. The book also pays tribute to another of my interests—the sprawling ancient battle scenes of the historical epics that Hollywood and Italian cinema made for a time. I won't say exactly where I've done it, but those interested in such things will know them when they see them. And finding them is part of the pleasure of this book.

March 13, 2012

While watching *Red River* Hideyuki Kikuchi